THREE

A COLLECTION OF GAY MENAGE ROMANCES BY L.A. WITT

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by L.A. Witt

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Three: A Collection of Gay Ménage Romances
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Contains

Out of Focus © 2012, 2017
Hiatus © 2016, 2017
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Three: A Collection of Gay Ménage Romances

A pair of Doms discovering an eager submissive… and room for more.

A long time couple losing hope for their marriage… and finding it again with the help of the man they both love.

An abuse survivor learning to love again… thanks to his best friend and his husband.

Trios may not be the norm, but for these men, the answer to the equation of love just might be three.

This collection features three full-length novels – *Out of Focus, What He Left Behind*, and *Hiatus*. These novels were previously published, and are also available individually.

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Out of Focus

For the last twelve years, Ryan “Angel” Morgan and Dante James have been partners in every sense of the word. They’re lovers, they run a successful photography business together, and couldn’t be happier. The only problem? They’re both dominants who crave submission. Solution? Bring in submissives for sizzling hot threeway action.

When Jordan Steele hires the photographers from his sister’s wedding to shoot some promo pictures of his stallions, the sparks fly. There’s something about them, something that’s anything but vanilla, and he wants a taste of it. He’s inexperienced, but curious, and Angel and Dante are more than happy to show him the ropes.

Jordan is exactly what they need and they’re exactly what he needs, but when emotions come into play, he may be more than they bargained for. After all, the one thing Angel and Dante can’t give each other is submission. If one of them can get love and submission from Jordan, will the other be pushed out of the picture?

This 100,000 word novel was previously published.

Chapter One

Dante

"Hey, Dante." Phoebe's voice was tinny over my Bluetooth headset. "Ryan and I are leaving now with the bride and groom. The guests are clearing out and heading your way. How close are you to the reception?"

"About three blocks." I drummed my fingers on the wheel as I waited for a red light to change. "What's your ETA?"

Phoebe said something I couldn't hear. From the background came a lower voice, that of Angel—Ryan to everyone else—my partner in both senses of the word. Distance and static muffled their brief conversation, but a moment later, Phoebe came back on the line.

"They want to do a few shots down by the marina and a quick one at a park about a mile from the reception. So, probably thirty to forty-five minutes."

"We'll be waiting." I hung up just as the light turned green, and started across the intersection.

In the passenger seat beside me, my assistant, Troy, rubbed his ankle and cursed under his breath.

"Feet bothering you?" I asked.

"It's these damned shoes," he said. "They were fine when I put them on, but Jesus, they're killing me now."

"I told you not to go cheap on shoes, didn't I?" I shot him a pointed look.

He sat back, fussing with his bow tie. "If I could afford two-hundred-dollar shoes, I'd get them."

"Trust me, Troy," I said, putting on my signal to turn into the country club parking lot, "if you're going to shoot weddings, comfortable shoes are worth the money, even if it means living off ramen and tap water for a month to pay for them."

"Well, if my boss gave me a raise—"

"Don't push it." I pulled up in front of the stairs leading into the lavish club. "I will, however, be nice and not make you walk across the parking lot this time."

"*Thank* you." He grabbed his coat and camera off the backseat, then got out so I could go park the car. He limped toward the stairs, and I chuckled to myself as I drove to the other side of the mostly empty lot. One of the earliest and most painful lessons of being a wedding photographer was that comfortable shoes were worth twice their weight in platinum, and the only thing worse than dealing with a bridezilla was shooting a wedding while one's feet were on fire. Angel and I had both learned that lesson the same way Troy learned it now: the hard way.

After I'd parked, I got out and put my tuxedo coat back on. I clipped my battery pack to my belt, put the camera strap over my head, and joined Troy inside the club. We had, I guessed, about ten minutes before the guests started arriving, so we split up to get shots of the various decorations, wedding favors, and of course, the towering cake.

About the time I'd finished playing pastry paparazzi, the double doors opened. Blinding natural light spilled across the dance floor and dining area, and I squinted against the brightness. Two silhouettes entered the room, and when the doors fell shut behind them, severing the light, I blinked a few times until my eyes adjusted.

When they had adjusted and the pair of newcomers was no longer backlit, my pulse went haywire, because the bride's brothers had arrived.

The younger of the two was obviously the type who'd rather be in torn jeans and a punk band T-shirt than a tuxedo, at least if the piercings and long hair were anything to go by. He had the "fine, I'll trim it just this once" goatee and insisted on wearing his wallet on a chain even when he was dressed to the nines. In spite of his bad-boy-wannabe appearance, he was friendly and polite, just like his siblings. And he was cute, I'd give him that, but nothing to write home about.

The elder brother, though. Jesus Christ. Clean-cut, fit as hell, with a smile that had damn near made me drop my camera when he'd walked his sister down the aisle. He was older than both of his siblings by quite a few years, I assumed. Probably mid- to late-thirties, so close to my age.

They kept walking, carrying a couple of boxes to the head table, completely oblivious to the photographer checking out the way that jacket fit the elder brother's shoulders. I wondered if Angel had noticed him. Hell, of course he had. This guy was totally Angel's type, *and* he was wearing a tux. Tuxedos made hot men hotter. It was an undisputed fact, written into the laws of physics and thermodynamics.

I shook my head and went back to making sure every last ribbon and petal had been documented for posterity. About ten minutes later, my cell phone vibrated. I pulled it off my belt, and Angel's name came up on the caller ID.

Keeping my voice low, I said, "Hey."

"We're pulling off the freeway right now," he said. "This limo driver thinks he's Mario-fucking-Andretti, so we'll be there shortly."

"Can you keep up with him?"

Angel clicked his tongue. "Can I keep up with him? Please."

"Just don't kill anyone, would you?" I said with a laugh.

"No promises."

Typical Angel. Rolling my eyes, I said, "See you when you get

here."

"Be there in a few."

I clipped my phone back to my belt and flagged Troy down. With him limping behind me, I went outside to wait for the limo.

By this point, most of the guests had gone outside as well, and the air was alive with chatter and dress shoes clicking on pavement. I snapped a few shots of everyone waiting for the bride and groom to arrive, all the while keeping an eye out for the limousine.

And, of course, scanning the crowd for a glimpse of *him*.

It didn't take long to find him. His mood had changed considerably, though. While he'd appeared relaxed and pleasant with his younger brother earlier, he wasn't happy now. Another guy stood close enough to imply they shared more than just platonic intimacy. And, by the expression on the gorgeous brother's face, just close enough to be irritating. They both spoke in hushed voices, punctuating their terse conversation with sharp gestures and icy glares.

Then the second guy put his hand on the brother's waist. The brother's expression darkened a little more and his posture stiffened, but he didn't pull away or brush off his companion's hand. They had that air about them of a squabbling old married couple, and the sexy one looked like he was a clenched jaw away from abandoning any hesitation to make a scene. Or kick the guy's ass.

Just our fucking luck. He was gay but taken, even if he wasn't too thrilled with his current circumstances.

It certainly wasn't my place to get involved, but this guy was supposed to be enjoying his sister's wedding, and wedding photographers had tricks up our sleeves for subtly defusing situations before they erupted into bigger problems. It was up to him if he wanted to take the bait.

Approaching like I was completely oblivious to their heated conversation, I said, "You're Jennifer's brother, right?"

He blinked in surprise. Then he cleared his throat and shifted his weight. "Uh, yeah, yeah, I am." He extended a hand. "Jordan Steele."

I shook it. "Dante James." I gestured over my shoulder. "Listen, any chance I could get you to rope a few people into keeping everyone back a little when the bride and groom get out of the car? I don't like to make a huge deal out of it, but sometimes guests get a little overexcited and crowd them."

Jordan shrugged. "Yeah, sure."

"Why don't you talk to the ushers about it?" his companion said through gritted teeth, narrowing his eyes at me.

Jordan put a hand up. "It's fine." They exchanged icy glares, and he added, "We'll finish this later, okay?"

“Fine,” came the terse reply, and the companion stormed off. I couldn’t help noticing the relieved breath Jordan released.

He rolled his shoulders and tilted his head sharply to one side as if to ease some tension. To me, he said, “Sorry about all of that.”

“It’s all right.” I smiled. “Sorry I interrupted your conversation.”

He gave a quiet laugh, and his eyes darted in the direction the other had gone, then back to me. “Don’t worry about it.” Our eyes met briefly, and I thought there was something else on the tip of his tongue, but he dropped his gaze and nodded toward the group of guests. “So, what was it you needed me to do again?”

“What? Oh, right.” I gestured in the same direction. “Just, you know, keep everyone from mobbing your sister when she gets out of the car.”

“Hey, what else is a big brother for?” He looked around. “And if I can find my baby brother, he can help too.”

I nodded past him. “I think he’s chatting up a couple of bridesmaids.”

Jordan glanced in the direction I’d indicated, then chuckled. “Why am I not surprised? I’ll go grab him.”

“Good, thanks. Sounds like the bride and groom should be here shortly.”

We exchanged smiles. God Almighty, his smile was as sexy as it was shy. If there’d been more confidence behind it just then, I might have needed medical attention.

Then he left to pry his younger brother away from the bridesmaids.

Moments later, Angel’s car turned into the parking lot. The limo was behind him, but didn’t turn. Probably circling the block to give Angel time to get out of the car and get his camera pointed in the right direction. Considerate driver. There needed to be more of those in this business.

Angel took off his sunglasses as he stepped out of his car, and my pulse was once again all over the place. I couldn’t count how many weddings we’d done over the years—well into the triple digits, I was sure—and my heart still fluttered whenever I saw that man in a tux. It was no wonder we always had scorching-hot sex after shooting a wedding, even when we were exhausted.

Oh, wasn’t I the very picture of professionalism today? Ogling the bride’s brother and my own boyfriend to the point of distraction. Such was an occupational hazard when my job required me to be around beautiful men in tuxedos, I supposed.

God, I love this job.

Jacket draped over his arm, he joined me on the curb. “Mind holding this for me?” He held his camera out.

“No problem.” I took the camera so he could straighten his cummerbund and pull his jacket around his shoulders.

He shrugged a few times and fussed with the lapels, then tugged the ends of his hair out from under his collar. Once he was apparently satisfied, he put his arms out and thrust his shoulders back. “How do I look?” How did he look indeed. His dyed black hair was almost darker than his jacket, emphasizing his fair skin and blue eyes, and he was, as always, gorgeous.

I grinned and spoke just loud enough for him to hear me. “You look like it’s going to be a long night tonight.”

Angel winked and took the camera back. “Good. Then all is working according to plan.” He searched the crowd of guests. “Where the hell did Phoebe go?”

“Over there. Probably wants to get some shots of the limo arriving.”

“Ah, that’s my girl.” He beamed. “Creative kid. I’m getting spoiled having an assistant like that.”

“We could always trade.”

He snorted. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Come on, Troy’s good.”

“Yeah.” He nodded toward Phoebe. “But he’s not *that* good.”

A flash of sun on glass turned both our heads and stopped our playful banter as the limo pulled in. In seconds, we were back to the usual chaos and craziness of wedding photography. Dodging people, trying to get every shot as the bride and groom got out of the car and went inside. Then it was receiving lines and the deejay announcing every member of the wedding party and at least half a dozen guests who insisted we needed to get shots of their children in their adorable suits and dresses. Eventually, everyone was herded toward the buffet line, and things died down once again.

“How are you doing on batteries?” Angel checked his own battery pack.

I pulled my jacket back enough to look at my pack. “This one’s getting low, but I still have two fully charged.”

He nodded. “What about Troy?”

“He changed his out when we got here.”

“What about memory?”

“Still have six untouched four-gig cards.” I put a hand on his arm, resisting the urge to make a reassuring gesture into an affectionate one. “Relax. We’re good.”

Angel started to speak again, but Jennifer appeared and grabbed us both by the elbows. “Come on, you two. Take a break. Eat.” Before either of us could protest, she shook her head. “Don’t argue. I paid for all four of you to have plates, and you’re damn well going to use

them."

Angel laughed. "Well, I'm certainly not going to argue with that."

She showed us to a table that had been reserved for the four of us. Phoebe, Angel and I left Troy to babysit our cameras while he rested his sore feet, and we went to get food. Brides like Jennifer were the best. Saints, really. They understood the need for people—even lowly beings such as wedding photographers—to eat. As it was, we had the advantage of enough manpower for any one of us to take a break if needed, a luxury solo photographers didn't have. Still, there were plenty of clients who made sure they got their money's worth, running all of us ragged until the reception finally ended at some ungodly hour and we drove off in search of the nearest fast-food joint.

Jennifer had been sweet and gracious from the beginning, though. "Anything you guys need, just say so," she'd said when we arrived this morning. "Water, someone to help you out, anything."

How about your brother's phone number?

Right. Like that would happen.

With a plate for me and one for Troy, I returned to the table. Angel and Phoebe joined us, and we spent a little while eating and relaxing, just shooting the breeze. No discussion of the rest of the reception or where we all needed to be for the cake cutting or bouquet toss, or Angel's obsessive need to make sure everyone had enough batteries and memory cards. The two of us may have been workaholics, but even we could turn it off long enough to inhale some food.

Angel laid his napkin beside his empty plate and sat back, drink in hand. He gestured around the room with his glass and said to our assistants, "Time for you two to earn your keep. Guests, candids, people doing what people do at weddings. Off you go."

Phoebe sighed and picked up her camera. "No rest for the wicked?"

"No rest for the assistants," I said.

Troy pushed his chair back and stood gingerly. "I suppose saying I have three blisters on my left foot won't get me out of it?"

Angel set his drink down. "If anything, it'll make me send you outside to run laps around the parking lot so you never, *ever* forget to wear comfortable shoes to a wedding."

Troy looked at Phoebe. "How do you put up with him?"

She shrugged. "I wear comfortable shoes, he stays off my ass."

Troy muttered something as he put his camera strap over his head. Then the two of them wandered off to do our bidding.

Once we were alone, I slid my hand onto Angel's knee under the table. As he often did, he'd been tapping his foot against the chair leg, but he stilled beneath my hand.

"You get a look at the brother of the bride?" I asked.

He whistled, sliding his hand over mine. "Oh God, yes. I got several looks at him."

"You and me both." I shook my head. "That man is liquid distraction."

"No shit." He ran his thumb back and forth along my wrist. "Imagine how I felt, trying to focus on the bride when I had *that* standing there being all gorgeous and entirely too dressed."

"Too dressed?" I glanced in Jordan's direction, then turned back to Angel. "He's in a tux."

"I know." He shrugged. "He should be naked in our bed."

I chuckled. "Pity he's already got someone."

"Seriously?" Angel released a sharp huff of breath. "The good ones always do, don't they? It's a crime, I'm telling you." He clicked his tongue. "And his other half probably doesn't share, either."

"I don't know; I didn't ask. He was pissed enough that I interrupted their little lover's quarrel."

He blinked. "You did?"

"Well, I didn't have much choice." I turned my hand over under his. "I needed Jordan's help with something."

"Yeah," he said, lacing our fingers together, "I'll just bet you did."

"Okay, so I didn't." I shrugged. "But things were getting a little heated between them, so…"

"Eh, I'd have done the same."

That much was true. We had our subtle ways of separating people when tensions got too close to a breaking point. Situations like that, particularly with the way alcohol and grudges made frequent appearances at weddings, could too easily erupt into a screaming match or a fistfight. So, we'd long ago devised ways to casually intervene. Moderately intrusive? Yeah, probably. But if it kept a wedding from turning into a brawl—and that had been known to happen—then it was worth a little social faux pas.

The bride and groom were making the rounds, saying hello to guests while Troy's and Phoebe's cameras flashed. Normally I wouldn't leave assistants to cover anything without at least one of us shooting as well, but these two kids were damned good. They were going to be some serious competition for us when they were out on their own. Assuming Troy ever got a decent pair of shoes, anyway.

So, we didn't worry about them while they trailed the newlyweds and we took a break. Ah, it was good to be the boss.

As dinner wound down, the cake cutting and such were coming up. Almost time to get back to work. While I did a quick battery check and changed out my memory card, fabric rustled behind me.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Jennifer asked.

"Absolutely." I started to turn around. "This food is—" The words stopped in my throat. That wasn't the groom standing next to her.

She gestured at him, as if I hadn't noticed his presence. "This is my brother, Jordan."

I smiled. "Oh yes, we've met."

"We haven't." Angel stood and extended his hand. "Ryan Morgan."

Jordan shook his hand. "I—it's…" He paused, moistening his lips as a hint of pink appeared on his cheeks. "It's nice to meet you."

To her brother, Jennifer said, "I need to go pretend to like my in-laws, so I'll leave you alone with them."

He chuckled. "Okay, thanks." She picked up her skirt and headed back toward some of the other tables. After she'd gone, Jordan said, "I, uh, my sister said you guys do pretty much any kind of photography?"

I'm dreaming. I'm totally dreaming. Oh God, please tell me he wants—

I cleared my throat. "What did you have in mind?"

"I breed and train horses," he said. "And I'm campaigning a couple of stallions this year. I need a few more up-to-date photos for my website and some ads." He raised his eyebrows. "Is that something you guys would be interested in doing?"

"Well, we're always happy to help someone flaunt a stud," Angel deadpanned.

Jordan blushed even more, dropping his gaze as he muffled a cough of laughter. "Right. Well. I haven't had great luck with my last couple of photographers, so I'm very much in the market for someone new." He paused, the color in his cheeks deepening slightly. "A new photographer, I mean."

"Can you handle two?" Angel asked.

If the poor man's cheeks got any redder…

"I'm sure we can help." I shot Angel a glare, and he widened his eyes as if to say "What?" I rolled mine and looked at Jordan again. "We haven't done any equestrian work in a few years, but show us some examples of what you have in mind and we should be able to give you what you want."

A shy smile played at his lips. "Good. Then—"

His teeth snapped together as his significant other materialized and put a hand on his shoulder. Jordan's hackles went up, his eyes narrowed, and judging by the way his cheek rippled, he must have been tightly clenching his jaw. The two men exchanged the coldest glare I'd seen at a wedding since the last time we put divorced parents into one picture, and the hand on his shoulder lifted away.

Then Jordan shook himself back to life and made a sharp gesture his companion. "Sorry, I'm being rude. This is Eli. My—"

“Just Eli is fine.” He didn’t offer a handshake or any other greeting, and neither of us made any attempt to do so either. Awkward silence descended, and I had a feeling Jordan was once again seconds away from lashing out at his…just Eli.

“Anyway, you were saying?” I asked Jordan. “About your photos?”

“Right.” Jordan cleared his throat. “Anyway, I’d like to sit down and discuss pricing, scheduling—all of that.”

“When would be a good time?” I asked. “If you’d like, you can come by the studio, and we’ll sort out the specifics.”

He nodded. “I can do that. During the week would be best. My weekends are usually shot.”

Angel pointed at his camera. “So are ours.”

Jordan laughed. “Yeah, I guess they would be.”

“Would Monday be good for you?” I turned to Angel. “We’re there all day this Monday, aren’t we?”

He nodded. “All in-studio shoots that day. Last one’s at four thirty, and we’re usually there until six or seven.”

“Why don’t I swing in around five, then?” Jordan asked.

“Five works,” I said.

Angel pulled out his wallet and took out a card. “That’s the address. Just give us a call if anything changes.” Jordan took the card, but jumped like Angel had shocked him. Knowing Angel, he’d made sure their fingers brushed, and Jordan’s blood pressure was probably all over the place now.

Jordan recovered quickly though, sliding the card in his back pocket as he said, “Will do.”

Eli shifted beside him. “Good, now why don’t we go grab a couple of drinks?”

“Okay, okay.” Jordan exhaled and added a muttered, “Like you need another fucking drink.”

“Hmm?” Eli asked.

“Nothing.” Jordan looked at us. “I’ll see you guys on Monday. Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” I said. “See you then.”

We watched the happy couple wander toward the bar with a good arm’s length of frosty distance between them.

“You know,” Angel said, “I take back what I said earlier about it being a crime that a man like that is taken.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He turned back toward the table and picked up his glass. “It’s a crime a man like that is taken by a douchebag like *that*.”

Chapter Two

Jordan

Dante and Ryan's studio was a forty-five minute drive from my farm. I couldn't decide if the constant barrage of cell phone calls on the way made the time fly by or slow right down. Either way, between the traffic and the calls, my blood pressure was through the roof when I pulled into the parking lot.

Laura, my barn manager, called twice about farrier and vet appointments. The other trainer, Noreen, needed to borrow my saddle because a new client's horse was too high in the withers for hers, oh and by the way, Bravado kicked two more boards off the fence in his paddock.

Such was life in this business, of course.

I parked in front of the studio, and just when I'd kicked off the engine, my phone rang again. I closed my eyes and groaned. Not because it was yet another fucking call, but because that specific ringtone always made my teeth grind.

Sighing, I picked up the phone and clicked it on so the call would go to my headset.

"Hey, sexy." Eli actually sounded like he was in a good mood. That was promising enough for me to ignore his irritating attempt to be flirty.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Just wanted to let you know the interview went well. She seemed pretty impressed, and she'll be calling tomorrow if they want to have me back for a second interview."

Oh, thank God. "That's great. Well, good luck."

"The pay's better than I thought too."

Please get this job. "How is it compared to what you were getting before?"

"Almost four dollars an hour more."

"Holy shit. That's awesome." *Please get this job. Please get this job. Please get this job*.

"I know, it's great." He paused. "So, they're—"

"Listen, I gotta go." I took the key out of the ignition and unbuckled my seat belt. "We can talk about it more when I get home."

"What time will you be home?"

I rolled my eyes, even though he couldn't see me. "I don't know for sure. I told you, I'm in town to meet with those photographers we met at Jenny's wedding."

“Oh, right,” he muttered. “Them. Well, I’ll see you when you get home, then. But before you go, I—”

“Eli, my battery’s dying.” Fidgeting in the driver’s seat, I glanced at the studio doors. “I have to go.”

“Don’t you ever charge that thing?”

“Yes, but I use it almost constantly. I’ll see you when I get home.”

“See you in a few.”

After we’d hung up—without a forced “I love you” this time, thank God—I swore under my breath. I changed my phone to vibrate, pretending not to notice the battery indicator, which showed three-quarters full. I could have sworn there was a time when we actually liked talking to each other. Oh well, those days were long gone, and the only thing I wanted to hear from him now was, “I’ve got a job, I’ve got an apartment, and I’ll be out of your house by the end of the month.” That day just couldn’t get here fast enough.

I got out of the car, shoved the phone and keys into my pocket, and went into the studio.

The lobby was small, but they’d certainly used the space well. Toward the back, two desks flanked another desk where a brunette receptionist currently spoke on the phone. The front half of the lobby had a few chairs and a coffee table on which someone had fanned several leather-bound portfolios.

Framed portraits of everyone from brides to athletes lined the left and back walls. Along the right, landscapes, abstract images and various print ads that prominently featured sharp, colorful photos of different products.

The brunette receptionist hung up the phone. “Sorry about that. Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I had an appointment with Dante and Ryan.” I paused. “Name’s Jordan Steele.”

She checked something on the spiral-bound book on her desk, then nodded. “I’ll let them know you’re here. They’re still in their last shoot for the day.”

“No rush.” I shrugged. “I’m early.”

Pushing her chair back, she smiled. “I’ll be right back. Have a seat.”

I sat in one of the chairs while she disappeared through a side door. While she was gone, I kept looking around the room, trying not to drum my fingers on the armrest. It wasn’t that I was nervous about consulting with photographers. I’d done this a million times, and it didn’t make me bat an eye.

It was *them*.

Ever since my sister’s wedding, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about them. Either of them. It had been bad enough trying to

maintain some semblance of dignity around Ryan all morning long while he'd photographed my family and the wedding party. When the ceremony started, I'd just about gotten the hang of breathing with him around, but I hadn't expected Dante. I'd damn near tripped over my own feet when I walked Jenny down the aisle; he'd momentarily lowered his camera right when I'd glanced in his direction, and… damn. Just…*damn*.

They were sexy as hell, each in his own way. Similar in some respects, polar opposite in others. Both had sharp, angular features, though Dante's were a little smoother. Both had blue eyes. Dante's were a more vivid blue, but Ryan's were intense, the kind that could see right through someone. Dante's platinum blond hair was short and meticulously spiked. Ryan's was ink black, though I couldn't decide if it was natural or dyed, and dipped just past his collar. I curled my fingers around the end of the armrest, fantasizing for the millionth time about running my fingers through his hair.

The receptionist came back in, startling me back into the present. "They probably won't be more than fifteen minutes."

"I can wait."

She smiled and took her seat behind her desk again. Her fingers clattered across the keyboard, and my thoughts drifted back to the two men in the other room.

It didn't help that Jenny had told me she was almost certain they were not only gay but together. Didn't it just figure the sexiest two men I'd encountered in a long time were both taken? By each other? Bastards.

To pacify my mind and give myself something else to think about, I leaned forward and looked at the portfolios on the table. Each was a different color and labeled according to content. *Bridal. Landscape. Commercial. Senior Portrait.*

I picked up the one marked *Landscape*. Flipping through it, I could definitely see how these guys made their living with their cameras. Besides being visually stunning, there were several notations that this or that photo had won prestigious-sounding awards. A few images were marked *National Geographic*.

Ryan and Dante were also obviously quite well traveled. I couldn't identify all the exotic monuments, landforms and cities, but I recognized shots of Easter Island, St. Basil's Cathedral, and in the background of a photo of a little boy hand-feeding a camel, the pyramids of Giza.

I wonder if they went to all those places together.

I shivered. I couldn't imagine them ever leaving their hotel rooms if they did.

The side door opened, and my head snapped up just in time to—

Madre de Dios. Even in jeans and a grey sweatshirt, trading Saturday's formality for Monday's laidback and comfortable, Ryan was gorgeous.

He glanced at me as he went back to one of the two desks behind the receptionist. "Hey, Jordan. Sorry we're running behind here."

"Fine by me."

"We should be wrapping this up soon. I just need…" He furrowed his brow, rifling through papers and shuffling folders around. "How the hell does he… Where is… Christ, how does he find anything?" He gestured sharply at the desk. "He calls this organized chaos. I see the chaos, but I'm not finding the organized. Where the—" He released an exasperated sigh and craned his neck toward the door through which he'd come. "Dante, I don't see it."

"It's right by the monitor," came the reply.

"So are three dozen file folders and a bunch of other crap."

Footsteps approached, and a second later, Dante appeared, cranking my heart rate up another notch or twelve. Like Ryan, Dante had traded formal for casual. Khakis and a polo, in his case, and it was no surprise he looked damned good in them.

"Oh, hey, Jordan." He shot me a quick smile, then reached for something on the desk. When he held it up—a memory card, I guessed —Ryan scowled and plucked it from between Dante's fingers. Dante laughed and disappeared back into the other room.

Ryan glanced at his watch and said to the receptionist, "You're clocking out soon, aren't you?"

"Few more minutes," she said. "I'm just about through with those bids you asked for." She gestured at a stack of file folders. "Where do you want them when I'm done?"

"Just leave them on my desk. I want to go over them before I take off tonight."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Kendra." With that, Ryan disappeared into the back.

I exhaled. Being that attractive around someone who was this sexually frustrated had to be in the Geneva Convention somewhere. It had to be.

To distract myself again, I mentally ran through my list of things to do when I got home. Bring in the horses that were still turned out. Make sure every horse who needed to be was blanketed for the night. If there was still daylight, see how badly Bravado had damaged the fence again. Find the kimberwicke bit for Noreen before tomorrow's lessons. Talk to Eli.

Eli.

Fuck.

Now that was a mental bucket of cold water. I sighed, staring up

at the ceiling. There was nothing quite so miserable as living with an ex-boyfriend, particularly one who didn't like the "ex" part of the equation. I rubbed my eyes. I just had to deal with it until he got a job. And an apartment. Both of which assumed he could find an employer and landlord who were willing to overlook his shitty credit and a résumé that may as well have listed "professional freeloader" as his job for the last three years.

I suppressed a groan.

Before I could spend too much time wallowing in fantasies of evicting Eli into a cardboard box, the door opened again. Dante came back into the room, and all the thoughts my irritating ex had scrubbed from my brain came flooding right back.

I was honestly starting to wonder if Ryan and Dante were both constitutionally incapable of looking like hell. They probably looked perfect from the moment they got out of the bed in the morning, when they'd be disheveled and—

Yeah, don't need to follow that particular train of thought just now.

Kendra put a stack of file folders on one of the two desks behind her own. Mercifully unaware of my impure thoughts about her bosses, she and Dante exchanged a few words, mostly about appointments and such for the following day. Then she picked up her jacket off her chair.

"I'm out of here," she said. "You boys behave yourselves."

Dante clicked his tongue and sighed. "Do we have to?"

Don't behave on account of me, I wanted to say.

"Yes, you do." She eyed Dante. "And would you please ask His Highness to call Mr. Vincent over at TechTron? I swear, if the man calls me one more time, I'm going to reach through the phone and choke him."

"Not in front of potential clients," Dante said in a stage whisper. He glanced at me and winked.

Kendra shot me a semi-apologetic look. To her boss, she said, "Anyway, please have Ryan call him."

"Will do. Now get out of here."

"Getting out of here." She pulled her purse out of a desk drawer and, with a sarcastic good-bye to her employers and a polite one to me, left.

"Okay, now we can get started." Dante gestured at a chair in front of Kendra's desk. "Have a seat, and I'll get all the paperwork." While I moved from the waiting area to the chair he'd indicated, he went to the third desk, the one across from the more cluttered one that had driven Ryan crazy earlier. "Now, where did…" He furrowed his brow, then called into the other room, "Angel, what did you do with the releases and quote for Jordan?"

Angel? I thought.

From the other room, Ryan said, “Bottom left drawer of my desk, under ‘S’, where any logical person would file it.”

Dante rolled his eyes. I snickered.

He opened the drawer and flipped through a few files before pulling a folder free. He started to return to where I sat, but paused, eyeing the desk for a second. Glancing through the open door, he slid the top few folders off, knocking the small pile into a messy fan. Then he pulled a couple of pens out of a cup beside the computer and scattered them across the blotter.

I watched him, puzzled, but said nothing. He just grinned and came to Kendra’s desk, dropping into her chair and laying the contents of the file folder out between us.

“Okay,” he said. “Here are a couple of different quotes, depending on how much time you want for the shoot, if it’ll be one or both of us, how many images you want to use for your website or ads, and if you’ll be ordering prints.” He slid a few more sheets across the desk. “These are model, property and hold harmless releases.”

I nodded. “Yeah, familiar with those.”

“Good.” He tucked the forms back into the folder. “One less thing to bore you with.”

“No need to worry about that.” Wasn’t that the truth. This may have been dull, monotonous business conversation, but he could have been reading the phone book aloud and his smooth voice would have kept me enraptured.

About that time, Ryan came back into the lobby, this time with a pair of female models in tow.

The redhead batted her eyes. “Sorry we kept you guys so long.”

Ryan chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll give you a call sometime next week when your pictures are ready.”

“Awesome. Thanks.” The blonde smiled, her expression no less flirty than the other. The girls headed out, and as they did, I watched Ryan and Dante, curious to see if they’d sneak a look at either girl before they were gone.

Not even a glance.

Probably because they were professionals. They’d just finished a damned photo shoot. If they’d wanted to grab an eyeful, they’d had plenty of chances without leering at the girls on their way out the door.

Still, Ryan and Dante were guys. I was a guy. If I caught sight of someone attractive, it wasn’t below me to indulge in at least a glimpse. Sort of like I’d done at every opportunity since I’d walked into this studio. Had the models been a pair of good-looking guys, I’d have thrown an over-the-shoulder glance their way before they were

gone.

These two? Nothing.

Because they're professionals, idiot, I reminded myself.

While Dante and I continued going over some quotes, Ryan was constantly on the move. To the other room. Into the lobby. At the file cabinet. Back into the other room. Everywhere he went, he walked fast, the kind of quick, deliberate walk of someone who didn't like wasting time getting from point A to point B, even if it was only a few feet away. This much energy at the end of the day? Jesus, the man must have had stock in Red Bull. Just watching him made me horn—tired. Watching him made me *tired*.

At one point, he stopped in his tracks, doing a double take at the cleaner of the two desks behind Dante. Then he glared at Dante's back before rolling his eyes and shaking his head. He put the pens Dante had dropped on the blotter back into their holder, then restacked the folders neatly before he slid them into a drawer. On his way past us, he hit Dante's chair with his hip, just hard enough to make Dante stumble over his words.

They swapped playful glares; then Dante turned his attention back to me. "You'll have to excuse us. We're not terribly mature after hours."

"After hours?" Ryan laughed. "How is that different from any other time?"

"Okay, but I wasn't going to just throw that out there, you know?" Dante gave an exasperated sigh. "I like to at least try to make us look professional."

"You know I believe in truth in advertising," Ryan said.

I put my hands up. "Hey, don't worry about being professional on my account."

"See, Dante?" Ryan bumped his chair again. "Lighten up."

I started to say something, but my phone picked that precise moment to vibrate in my pocket. "Fuck, what now?" I grumbled. When I pulled it out, Laura's name flashed up on the caller ID. At least it wasn't Eli, but it probably was important. "Speaking of being professional," I said. "Do you mind if I take this?"

Dante shook his head. "Not at all."

I offered an apologetic smile, then answered. "What's up?"

"Hey, Jordan," Laura said. "Listen, I left you a note in the barn, but the boards in Bravado's paddock—"

"He knocked them down again, I know," I said. "Noreen called me about it earlier."

"Oh, okay. I reattached the middle board, but the bottom one is in three pieces."

"Guess I'm making a run to the lumberyard tomorrow, then," I

said. “Anyway, just put him in his stall for the night so he doesn’t impale himself on it or knock anything else down.”

Dante raised an eyebrow, and I tried not to laugh. Sometimes I forgot how strange things like this sounded to people who weren’t around horses all day long.

To Laura, I said, “I’m right in the middle of meeting with someone, though, so I should let you go.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’d forgotten all about that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.” I hung up and slid my phone back into my pocket. “Sorry.”

Dante made a dismissive gesture. “Must have been important if you were concerned about someone getting impaled.”

I laughed. “Not really. One of my stallions seems to think it’s his sworn duty to break through every board in every fence on my property.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, if he hasn’t kicked them down, he’s put hoof prints in them.” I made an exasperated gesture. “And the other stud has decided he’s part termite and keeps gnawing on any piece of wood he can reach. They’re going to bankrupt me, the fuckers.”

“I never thought horses were terribly destructive creatures.”

Ryan snorted as he walked past with his nose in a file folder. “Only because you haven’t spent much time around them.”

“You have?” I asked.

“Not for many, many years.” He paused in the doorway. “But I had horses when I was a kid. 4-H, that sort of thing. Enough that I’ve replaced more than my fair share of boards, posts and stall doors.”

I sighed. “Story of my life.”

He chuckled, then went back into the other room again, leaving me alone with Dante.

“Anyway,” I said, “hopefully that’s it for my phone interrupting me. Just the joys of owning a business, I guess.”

Smiling, he said, “I know the feeling, believe me.”

“You two both own it, though, don’t you?”

He nodded. “Full partners.”

“So to speak,” Ryan chimed in from the other room.

“Shut up.” Dante laughed. He cleared his throat. “Anyway, yeah, we’re business partners.”

“Must be nice.” I sat back, clasping my hands together on top of my belt buckle. “Believe me, there are days I really, really wish I could hand the proverbial reins off to someone else and let them deal with it for a while.”

“Oh, I can imagine.” Dante thumbed his chin, an unspoken thought furrowing his brow. After a moment, he shook his head and

shuffled through the papers between us. “So, with all of that out of the way, let’s talk about how we’re going to shoot your horses.”

“Appropriate way to put it,” I said.

We went over some ideas for shots. I explained that I needed some headshots of both stallions, plus a few of them under saddle.

“For now, it’ll just be the two stallions,” I said. “But I’ll probably call you back for more in the spring when this year’s crop of foals are born.”

“Baby horses?” Dante glanced over his shoulder, then dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Don’t say that too loudly around Ryan.”

“Why not?”

“Watch this.” Craning his neck, he called out, “Hey, Angel, would he have to twist your arm to do a shoot with a bunch of baby horses?”

“Baby horses?” Ryan appeared in the doorway, eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Well, not for a while yet.” Dante looked at me. “Right?”

I nodded. “First foals of the season won’t be for a couple of months.”

“If you need pictures of them, *please* call us,” Ryan said just before disappearing again.

Watching him go, Dante shook his head. To me, he said, “Told you.”

“You’re not into animals?” I asked.

“Oh, I love animals, but he’s definitely more of a critter person than I am. He loves horses, and he’ll fawn over *anything* that’s cute and fluffy.”

“Oh, shut up,” Ryan said, reappearing with a stack of papers in his hand.

“Come on, it’s true.” Dante grinned up at Ryan as he walked by. “I can’t let you anywhere near a puppy.”

“Yeah.” Ryan playfully smacked Dante’s shoulder with the papers he carried. “But only because you’d be afraid of its mother.”

“Hey, now.”

I cocked my head. “You’re afraid of dogs?”

Dante’s cheeks colored. “I’m a little intimidated by big dogs.”

“He’s afraid of dogs.”

“Shut up.” Dante glared at Ryan, who shot him the least convincing look of innocence I’d ever seen.

I tried not to laugh. “Good to know. I’ll make sure mine’s penned up when you come to the farm.”

“It’s okay,” Dante said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Trust me, it’s not a big deal.” I shrugged. “He’s not aggressive, but if you’re intimidated by big dogs, well… I’ll just pen him up.”

Dante smiled. “Works for me.” He flipped open the receptionist’s appointment book. “So, when do you want to do this shoot?”

I leaned forward, and he turned the book so I didn’t have to read upside down.

“What about Wednesday?” Dante said.

“I can do Wednesday morning,” I said. “That afternoon is shot, but the rest of this week and next week are flexible.”

Dante turned around. “Angel, I need your input on this too. Do you have anything on your schedule that isn’t in the book yet?”

Ryan came over. He put one hand on the desk beside Dante’s arm, leaning on it while he rested his other hand on the back of Dante’s chair. “Hmm, I think I’ve got something tentative on Wednesday. And didn’t you have a reschedule for that day?”

“Oh, shit, that’s right.” Dante pursed his lips. “Thursday?”

Absently, probably not nearly as aware of it as I was, Ryan moved his hand from the back of the chair to Dante’s shoulder.

“I’ve got two commercial clients booked that morning,” he said, completely oblivious that I was watching his thumb make slow up-down arcs just above Dante’s collar. “Taking traffic into consideration, I should be back here by one, and…” He paused. “How far did you say it is from here to your place?”

I jumped, forcing myself to focus on the calendar and not that down-up-down caress. I cleared my throat. “Forty-five minutes to an hour.”

Ryan nodded. “Maybe we could aim for two thirty, then? That’ll give us enough time, don’t you think?”

“That works.” Dante raised his eyebrows at me. “Work for you?”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine.”

“We’ll mark it down, then.”

Dante grabbed a pen out of the holder. He uncapped it, but Ryan put his hand over the blank on the calendar. He pulled another pen out of the holder and held it out to Dante.

“Right. Blue for appointments.” Dante rolled his eyes and took the pen. “How could I forget?” As he wrote my name and the time on the calendar, I peered at the other blanks. Sure enough, there was a definite color scheme: appointments in blue, consults in red, employee days off in black.

With my appointment on the calendar—in blue, of course—Dante closed the book and extended his hand.

“Guess we’ll see you on Thursday.”

I shook his hand. “Looking forward to it.” When I shook Ryan’s hand, I tried to tell myself the warmth in his palm was his own body heat, not Dante’s, but at least one part of my mind didn’t want to hear it.

Once politeness, formalities and a little small talk were taken care of, I headed for the door. I surreptitiously watched their reflections in the window.

Dante looked.

So did Ryan.

I kept walking, and my heart kept thundering.

Outside, I got in my car. I turned on the engine, but before I shifted into reverse, I paused for a minute to collect my thoughts. Occasional meetings like this were part of my job, and I had never left one with blood pounding in my ears and my body damn near twitching from tension that needed to be relieved, like, *now*.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. Yeah, they'd looked.

Damn the luck. Ryan and Dante were gorgeous, gay and together.

And I got to go home to Eli.

Fuck my life.

Chapter Three

Angel

As we pulled our camera gear out of the trunk of my car at Jordan's farm, Dante's spine stiffened. I was about to ask what was wrong, but then I heard, between deep, loud barks, gravel scattering under what must have been huge paws.

I turned, and a German shepherd loped toward us, kicking up dust and rocks. Oh, fuck. Dante and a large dog. Always a good combination. I stepped around him, figuring the dog wasn't aggressive if it was loose like this, even if there *had* been a *Beware of Dog* sign on the gate.

Then, a sharp voice came from behind us: "Sasha, *no*."

The dog skidded to a halt, spraying gravel as it did.

I looked the other direction. Jordan was on his way up the path from the barn.

He snapped his fingers. "Sasha, come." More rocks flew as the dog scrambled to his master's side. Beside me, Dante exhaled. I put my hand on the small of his back.

Jordan scratched the dog's ears and murmured, "Good boy." To us, he said, "Sorry about that. I thought Eli put him in his kennel."

"Don't worry about it," Dante said. "I'm guessing he's…friendly?"

"Oh God, yes." Jordan looked down at the shepherd. "You'd sooner lick someone to death than bite them, wouldn't you?" The dog just panted and wagged his tail, kicking up more dust. To Dante, Jordan said, "I can put him up if you'd be more comfortable, though."

Dante shook his head. "It's okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's fine."

"Okay, well, let's go shoot some horses, then." Jordan grinned.

"Sounds like fun," I said, laughing in spite of what Jordan's expression did to my pulse.

"I bathed both of them earlier," he said, "so they'll still be clean if they know what's good for them."

"Bathed?" Dante asked, pulling his camera bag onto his shoulders. "How the hell do you bathe a horse?"

"Okay, maybe showering would be a more apt description." Jordan chuckled. "Either way, they're clean."

I closed the trunk, and we followed Jordan toward the barn. On the way down the path, I took in a long, deep breath through my nose. Just the smell of the farm took me back. Cedar bedding, alfalfa, even that familiar musty scent of dust and cobwebs. All it needed was some beauty bark to send my mind right back to my horse-show days,

and I hadn't realized how much I'd missed this environment until now.

A calico cat trotted past us, eyeing the dog the same way Dante had. I stopped and knelt, holding out my hand, and the cat approached me cautiously. She sniffed my outstretched fingers, then must have decided I wasn't a threat, because she rubbed her head on the back of my hand. She couldn't have been an exclusively outdoor cat; she was much too glossy to live in the rafters, too well fed to subsist on mice.

"You have the best of both worlds, don't you?" I scratched her back, and she started purring up a storm. "Spoiled, much?"

"Hey, Dr. Doolittle." Dante's voice came from farther down the barn aisle. "We're here for the other critters. You can pet the kitty later."

"Yeah, yeah, shut up." I scratched the cat's back once more, then got up and kept walking.

About the time I'd caught up, Jordan stepped out of a stall leading one of the horses. I assumed it was a horse, anyway. From about the knees down, it was obviously equine, but aside from that, the rest of the body except the eyes and muzzle were covered by a dusty red blanket and matching Spandex hood.

"This," Jordan said, dropping the lead rope to the cement, "is Arturo." He didn't bother tying the horse, just left the lead rope on the ground and went about undoing the straps on the blanket. He pulled off the blanket, and the dangling buckles banged and clanged as he draped it over the stall door. Then he peeled off the hood, and the horse shook himself hard enough his hooves slid on the cement.

And, wow, what a gorgeous animal. Solid bay, not a fleck of white to be seen. He was probably a good sixteen hands, maybe a little more, and quite a bit lankier than the quarter horses I'd grown up on.

I held out my hand, and the stallion sniffed it, feeling around with his upper lip in case I had any treats. "What breed?"

"Morgan." Jordan ran a soft brush over the horse's back, then patted his neck.

"Really? I didn't think they got this big."

"Some do. You should have seen his sire." Jordan smoothed a few wayward strands in Arturo's mane. "I swear to God the fucker was pushing seventeen hands."

"Damn." I stroked Arturo's face, gently nudging him away when he tried to chew my belt. "My sister had one years ago that was barely a pony."

"Yeah, that's not unusual."

I glanced at Dante. His eyebrows were up, an invisible question mark dangling over his head. We both laughed, and he shook his

head. I was just as clueless whenever he talked to classic-car owners, so we were pretty much even.

"A Morgan, huh?" he said. "Shouldn't be hard for you to remember that."

I sniffed indignantly. "Like I'd forget a horse's breed even if it wasn't also my name."

"True," Dante said. "God forbid you forget such an important detail."

I glared at him but couldn't keep a straight face any more than he could.

Jordan picked up the lead rope again. "Ready?" he asked us.

"Whenever you are," Dante said.

Jordan opened his mouth as if to speak, but whatever it was he'd thought to say, he let it go. He gestured for us to follow him and led the horse toward one end of the aisle. The otherwise quiet barn came alive with the rhythmic clunk of hooves and the clatter of the dog's claws on the cement in between our footsteps.

Outside, gravel crunched beneath everyone's feet as Jordan led us past the covered arena to a larger, open-air one on the other side. Good, the lighting would be better out here. It was an overcast day, which was perfect, and we could rely on soft, diffused natural light instead of direct sun or flashes.

In the outdoor arena, Jordan stopped. Pointing toward the gate, he said to his dog, "Sasha, lay down." Immediately, the shepherd went to the gate, circled a few times and flopped down in the dirt. Jordan praised him, then nodded at the horse. "I just want to get some headshots and standing shots of this one."

"Nothing under saddle or in action?" I asked.

"Not this time." Jordan adjusted the stallion's halter. "He was limping a bit yesterday and this morning, so I don't want to push him."

"Is he okay?" I asked.

"He's fine." Jordan stroked Arturo's face. "Just an old injury that comes back to bite him once in a while, so I take it easy with him when it flares up."

"Well, whatever you want to do is fine with us," Dante said.

I took off my lens cap. "We're ready when you are."

Jordan pulled a red and white peppermint candy out of his pocket and crinkled the wrapper. Arturo's ears immediately pricked up. Jordan held it just out of the horse's reach, encouraging him to stretch his neck out a little. After a few shots like that, he patted the horse's neck, then fed him the peppermint.

"Good boy," he murmured as the horse crunched contentedly on the candy.

Photographing a horse was usually like photographing a kid or a puppy. There was about a ten-minute window before boredom set in and attention wandered. At that point, it became like pulling teeth to get the subject to look at the camera, let alone with any interest.

Not Arturo. He was a ham for the camera. Even Dante couldn't help laughing at the way Arturo showed off. I swore the stallion stopped just short of batting his eyes at us. As long as the cameras kept snapping and Jordan kept praising, the horse kept right on posing until Jordan decided it was enough.

"Okay, camera whore." Jordan patted Arturo's shoulder. "That's plenty for one day." To us, he said, "I'll go put him away and get the other. Do you guys just want to wait out here?"

"Can do," Dante said.

Jordan led the horse out of the arena with Sasha hot on his heels.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Dante turned to me. "God *damn* it, that man is hot."

"I know. Fuck." I stared at Jordan. Ever since the wedding, he hadn't been far from my mind or from conversations with Dante. Jordan intrigued both of us, what could I say? And it was probably criminal for me to think it, but watching him now, I swore his ass looked even better in dusty jeans than it had in tux pants. It would probably look even better with nothing on except my hands on his hips. Or Dante's hands on—

I shook my head and coughed behind my hand. "Anyway," I said, turning to Dante, who was clicking through some of his pictures. "How are your shots coming out?"

"So far, so good." He glanced up from the preview screen on his camera and gave me a devilish grin. "I must confess, not all of my frames have a horse in them."

I clicked my tongue. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Admit it, you did the same thing."

"Did I?"

"Oh, come on, I know you." He inclined his head. "Don't tell me you didn't."

I snorted. "Of course I did. Just like I grabbed an excessive number of candids of him at the wedding." I paused. "You know, since he was an important part of the wedding party. And…stuff."

Dante laughed. "That's what I figured."

Minutes later, hooves crunched on gravel behind us. I looked toward the barn. The horse plodding beside Jordan was a bit smaller in stature than Arturo had been, and so dark he was almost black. The lead rope was draped over his withers, and Jordan didn't even bother holding it. He focused on the horse, probably saying something to him, and I smiled to myself. At least I wasn't the only one who carried

on conversations with animals.

They came into the arena, and when he stopped, the horse did too. No words, no tug at the lead rope, not even a gesture. One halted, and so did the other.

Jordan tousled the horse's forelock. "This is Bravado. You'd never guess he's Arturo's half-brother, but…"

I let Bravado sniff my hand. "Little brother, apparently."

"Three years older, if you can believe it. Just smaller." He patted the horse's shoulder. "Come on, kiddo, let's see what you've got."

Jordan set him up in the same poses he'd put Arturo through. Bravado wasn't quite as enamored of the camera as his brother, but he patiently did as he was told. He put his ears up when Jordan crinkled candy wrappers, turned his head, stretched his neck, whatever his trainer asked him to do.

"I want to get a few of this guy in action," Jordan said. "Are you guys comfortable with him being loose in here?"

I looked at Dante, eyebrows raised. He shrugged, but I didn't miss the slight bob of his Adam's apple. I tilted my head in a silent *are you sure?* He nodded.

"Yeah," I said to Jordan. "It's fine."

He unclipped Bravado's lead rope and gently tapped it against the horse's shoulder. "Go on, go play."

It didn't take much to convince him. The stallion jogged away. Once he was near the middle of the arena, he bucked a few times before he took off to the other end. There, he skidded to a halt, narrowly avoiding crashing into the fence, then turned around, and came back toward us. I knelt in the dirt to get a better angle, and snapped away as Bravado ran and played. Dante stayed back a little; we both had telephotos, so he could afford to keep a comfortable distance.

In the back of my mind, I couldn't help thinking about the way Jordan interacted with his horses. I was admittedly a little surprised to see how gentle, even affectionate, he was with them. I'd seen a lot of professionals who were cold and indifferent, sometimes even cruel, but not Jordan. He connected with them.

As if he was lacking in ways to make me weak in the knees.

After we'd gotten plenty of shots of Bravado in action, Jordan whistled. The horse spun and jogged across the arena to his master. Jordan praised him and gave him a mint. While Bravado crunched away on the candy, Jordan clipped the lead rope back on the halter.

"Would you guys mind doing a few shots of him going over some jumps?" He gestured at three jumps set up along the far side of the arena.

"Not at all," I said. "You're writing the check, so whatever you

want." Our eyes met. *Yes, Jordan. Whatever you want.*

He cleared his throat, throwing the lead rope over Bravado's neck. "He's probably warmed up enough, but let me take him around the arena a few times to make sure."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Dante asked.

Jordan looked over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows.

Dante nodded at the horse. "A saddle?"

"Pfft. Who needs a saddle?" With that, Jordan effortlessly hoisted himself onto the horse's back. "I prefer to ride bareback." Picking up the lead rope, he grinned and gave Dante a wink. "Well, with horses, anyway."

I almost dropped my camera. Dante coughed.

Before either of us could sputter through a comeback, Jordan and the horse were gone, cantering to the opposite end of the arena.

"Did he just…" Dante gestured at Jordan. "Did he just say that?"

I nodded. "He so did."

"And here I was worried about overstepping a bound and offending him."

"Oh, I don't think we're going to offend him." I moistened my lips. "That was an invitation if ever I heard one."

"Easy, Angel," Dante said in a playfully scolding tone. "Don't scare the guy."

"Hey, if he can make comments like that, so can I."

He eyed me. "Yeah, except you're usually a bit more brazen than that."

"So?" I shrugged. "Make it brazen enough, and maybe he'll—"

"*Angel*." He shot me a pointed look. "He was probably just kidding around. And need I remind you, he had that unsightly growth at the wedding?"

"Damn, that's right." I sighed. "Ah, well. A boy can dream."

I knelt to get a better angle and kept shooting, resting my elbow on my knee for stability as I followed horse and rider with my camera.

Bravado eased into a canter. After a couple of small circles, Jordan aimed him toward the jumps. The horse sailed over them, landing perfectly. No saddle, no bridle, and if Jordan was off-balance at any time, I sure as hell didn't see it.

Trying in vain to kneel comfortably, a task getting progressively more difficult every time Jordan fucking *breathed*, I said, "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"If you're thinking along the lines of how strong his legs must be, then yes."

"Ooh, yeah." I paused to take a shot, waiting until the horse was in midair over a jump. "Would you be mad if I said I really, *really* want to fuck him?"

Dante's camera clicked. "As long as you're referring to Jordan, not the horse."

"Fuck you. So I suppose it would be considered"—I paused to concentrate on another shot—"unprofessional to suggest—"

"Yes, it would be."

I glanced up at him, eyebrow raised. "You don't even know what I was going to say."

"I know you."

"Admit it," I said, looking through my viewfinder again. "It would be hot."

"Never said it wouldn't be." *Click. Click. Click*. "But it *would* be unprofessional."

"Damn it."

He laughed, and we kept shooting.

Jordan brought Bravado down to a walk and guided him back in our direction. He looked at us, then past us, and furrowed his brow.

I glanced over my shoulder, and a blonde woman approached. Jordan and Bravado met her at the gate.

"Guys, this is Laura, my barn manager," Jordan said. "Laura, Dante and Ryan. They're…" He paused. "Well, the cameras probably give it away."

"Yeah, I think I can figure that out." Laura smiled at us. "Nice to meet you guys." To him, she said, "The hay company called and wants to reschedule for the end of next week, so—"

"No." Jordan put up a hand and shook his head. "We don't have nearly enough timothy *or* alfalfa to push it that far. Call them back and tell them they either deliver it by Monday, or we'll contract with Hanson's."

Laura nodded, making a note on the pad in her hand. "Also, I wanted to ask if I should give Sunny's owners a warning letter or see if they're late on next month's board."

"Give them the letter." Jordan shifted on Bravado's back, absently adjusting the lead rope he used for reins. "With people on the waiting list, we don't need to put up with late payments. Next month is on time, or they're out of here."

"What a pity," she muttered.

"Yeah, no shit." Jordan paused. "Oh, I meant to ask earlier, when you're out getting grain tomorrow, could you stop by the lumberyard and get a few more boards? Just in case this one decides to play demolition horse again?"

"Will do." She scribbled something on her notepad. "Anything else?"

"No, I think that's it. Thanks, Laura."

"Not a problem."

As she walked away, he turned to us. “Sorry about that. This shit never ends. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah, we do.” A mischievous grin tugged at Dante’s lips. “Sounds like you don’t take the orders around here, do you?”

Without missing a beat, and probably speaking without thinking, he said, “Not nearly often enough, no.”

His answer sent my heart into my throat. Dante glanced at me, wide-eyed.

Jordan quickly cleared his throat. “I mean, like I said, you know how it is. Being the boss. Runs you down sometimes.” He gestured at the jumps. “Want me to take him over a few more times?”

“Sure, sure,” Dante said. “Go ahead.”

As Jordan took Bravado to the other side of the arena again, Dante and I exchanged glances.

“You still thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

We kept snapping away until Jordan decided Bravado had had enough, but the whole time, his comments kept replaying in my mind. Were there lines here to read between? Was he really dropping hints? Perhaps subtle hints about a submissive side?

No, no, I was jumping the gun. I *wanted* him to be a sub. Dante and I hadn’t had a submissive in entirely too long, so I was reading way, way too much into benign comments and body language. I had no reason to believe Jordan was a sub or would even want anything to do with our slightly-to-the-right-of-normal relationship. The only thing I knew was that whatever deities I had to appease for us to have the chance to top someone as hot as Jordan, I would.

That said, I’d been right about subs before. Like the unexplainable and undeniable chemistry between mates, there was that vibe from sub to Dom. Little tells that added up.

We’d unsettled him from the moment we’d met. I’d watched him interact confidently with people at the wedding, not to mention standing up to give a toast without a hint of nerves. He was anything but shy, but around us? He was nervous, tongue-tied, with the occasional surge of confidence in the form of a brazen remark about riding bareback or a more subtle one about taking orders.

Our last couple of subs had reacted the same way in the beginning. One was a seasoned submissive who just wasn’t sure about us at first, particularly since two Doms are a wee bit more intimidating than one. The other was inexperienced, and once we’d coaxed him into admitting he was intrigued by the idea, the three of us had had a *great* time together.

Pity Jordan was tied up with that douchebag we’d met at the wedding. He’d probably have been much happier tied up with us.

Assuming, of course, I read him right and wasn't projecting what I wanted him to be. One off-the-cuff comment and some wishful thinking did not a submissive make. I tried to push those thoughts aside as I followed Jordan, Dante and Bravado back to the barn, but curiosity was a bitch to ignore. I had to know.

On the way through the barn, a crop whip hanging on the wall caught my eye. I took it down.

"Hey, Dante," I said. "Think we should get one of these?"

Just as I'd hoped, Jordan turned around, and his eyebrows shot up. Holding his gaze, I smacked my palm with the whip.

The horse barely responded. Jordan, on the other hand, stared at me with widening eyes, his lips parting.

Dante shrugged. "Sure, we can get one, but who the hell are we going to hit with it?"

Jordan gulped. I hit my hand again for good measure, the sound echoing down the aisle, and I thought he was going to faint. I put the whip back. He watched me rub my stinging palm with my other hand, and probably had no idea I caught him sweeping the tip of his tongue across his lower lip. He didn't appear in the least bit offended. A little flushed in the face and tight in the jeans, but not offended.

Then he coughed and gestured at the horse. "I'd better put him back in his stall."

As Jordan walked away with Bravado, Dante and I looked at each other.

He grinned. So did I.

Jackpot.

Chapter Four

Jordan

My hands shook as I unbuckled Bravado's halter.

I'd imagined that conversation, right? Or at least its not-so-subtle implications. They were probably just joking around. I'd started it, after all, with my "bareback" comment that made me want to crawl off into a corner and die a thousand times over. Thank God Bravado could run like hell, because in that moment, I couldn't have gotten far enough away fast enough.

They didn't seem put off by it. Certainly not offended. Maybe after my lapse in verbal restraint, they'd decided I wasn't as uptight as some of their clients, and they could let their hair down a little.

A little? Something as brazen as Ryan with the crop was more than letting his hair down a little. Especially with the way he'd looked *right* at me when he did it.

Or I could have been seeing them through frustration-tinted glasses, finding interest and flirtation wherever I wanted to see it. They were a couple of professionals. Hell, they were a couple. *Keep dreaming, Steele*.

Before I left the stall, I took a deep breath and, as subtly as I could, adjusted the front of my jeans. *Come on, come on, calm down.* At least I'd held off getting turned on until after I was off the horse. Riding bareback—"Well, horses, anyway." God, what was I thinking? —was perfectly comfortable *except* when I had a hard-on. I should have known that was avoidable for only so long with them around.

And that sound, holy fuck, that sound.

Smack.

Leather on flesh.

I shivered. What I wouldn't have given…

Clearing my throat, I stepped out of the stall and hung the halter on the door. As I latched the door, I said, "Looks like that's it. Those were the two I wanted you to shoot." While I dusted my hands off on my jeans, my stomach fluttered with nerves. I couldn't breathe while they were here, but wasn't so sure I was ready for them to leave. Did I dare? I coughed again. "You're both welcome to, um, come up to the house for drinks if you're not in a hurry."

They glanced at each other. Something unspoken passed between them. Then Dante said, "Sure, why not?"

Sweet.

Oh, shit.

After they'd put their gear in their car, we walked up the gravel path from the barn to the house. In the utility room downstairs, I

pointed at the dog's kennel.

"Sasha, crate."

He obediently crossed the room and lay down in his crate.

"Good boy." I looked at Dante. "He'll stay in here until you guys take off."

"Oh, don't worry about him. He's fine." Dante smiled but still sent a wary glance in Sasha's direction.

"This is where he usually chills in the evening anyway," I said. "He gets himself all worked up running around the farm, so I like to let him relax a bit. He's getting too old to run himself into the ground like that." *Why am I rambling like a nervous kid?* "Can I get either of you a beer?" *God knows I need one*.

Ryan lifted his eyebrows at Dante.

"I can drive home," Dante said. "Go ahead."

"What about you?" I asked. "Coke, water, iced tea?"

"Coke is fine."

I got a Coke for him and a couple of beers for Ryan and me, and we moved into the living room. They sat on the couch while I took a seat on the recliner, which had an old blanket thrown over it for nights like this when I didn't feel like changing clothes immediately after working.

For a little while, we talked shop, discussing how long it would take for the pictures to be edited and things like that.

While we talked, I realized this was the first time I'd ever seen Ryan sit still. Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. Though he wasn't up and moving, he certainly wasn't still. He wasn't what I'd call twitchy, just…active. Sometimes he'd run the toe of one shoe back and forth along the insole of the other. Or he'd play with the cuff of his sleeve or the hem of his shirt. One hand rested on the couch's armrest, and if his fingers weren't tapping, they idly traced the seams and patterns in the upholstery.

At one point, while the conversation meandered into one-upping each other with client horror stories, Dante put his arm around Ryan's shoulders. Ryan took a breath, released it, and was still. His foot didn't move. His fingers stopped toying with his sleeve. His other hand rested on the armrest.

Neither of them missed a beat in the conversation. I doubted they even realized it had happened.

"So how long have you been doing this?" Dante gestured out the picture window that overlooked the barn and paddocks. "Raising and training horses, I mean."

"All my life," I said. "It was a family thing, and when my parents died, I bought out my siblings so I could keep the farm."

"Seems like you've done pretty well with it," Ryan said.

I shrugged. “As well as can be when I still have to pay all the bills before I get to enjoy the profits.”

They both laughed.

“We feel your pain,” Dante said.

“What about you guys?” I asked. “How long have you been photographers?”

“I went pro when I was twenty,” Ryan said.

“Nineteen for me,” Dante said.

“And you’ve been working together all this time?”

“Oh, no, we both started separately,” Ryan said. “Opposite sides of the country, in fact. We’ve been working together for, what?” He looked at Dante. “Eight years now?”

“Almost nine, I think,” Dante said, his fingers moving up and down Ryan’s arm, mirroring the way Ryan had caressed Dante’s neck at their studio.

“Wow. Time flies.” Ryan shook his head. “And we’ve been together…” He furrowed his brow and turned to Dante again.

Dante pursed his lips. “Twelve years, isn’t it?”

Ryan whistled. “I don’t usually stop and think about it, but when I do…”

“No kidding,” Dante said.

“It’s okay, though.” Ryan shrugged. “In two years, I get to trade you in for two twenties anyway.”

Dante kicked Ryan’s ankle. “That’s assuming you live that long, smartass.”

I laughed. “You know, it always amazes me when a couple can work together. Especially for that long.”

Dante combed his fingers through Ryan’s hair, smiling fondly at him. “Oh, it has its ups and downs.”

“I can imagine,” I said.

“It helps that we keep a lot of the business separate,” Ryan said. “We do plenty of work together, but there are parts we do on our own. The commercial side—product photography, stuff for catalogs, that kind of thing—is almost entirely mine.”

“And I do most of the family and senior portraits,” Dante said. “We both back each other up and fill in if the other can’t keep up with all the bookings, but it makes it a little easier if we can at least work separately on a few things.”

Ryan rested his hand on Dante’s knee. “Keeps us out of each other’s hair.”

“Otherwise we butt heads.” Dante looked right at me, eyes narrowing slightly as he added, “Since we both like to be in charge.”

I wondered if I was imagining the way they both looked at me just then, like they were trying to read my reaction. I certainly wasn’t

imagining the way my heart skipped. I coughed into my fist. “So, did you start out doing weddings and stuff like that? Then slowly branch out or what?”

Dante shook his head. “We both started out as photojournalists. Used to travel all over the place, did some work for *National Geographic*, that kind of thing.”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah, I saw that in your portfolio.”

“That’s actually how we met,” Ryan said.

“Really?”

Dante smiled at Ryan, absently playing with Ryan’s hair while he spoke. “We were both on assignment in New Delhi and ran into each other.”

“Quite *literally* ran into each other.” Ryan returned Dante’s smile. “I was trying to get a shot of some baskets a street vendor was selling…”

“I was trying to get a wide-angle shot of the street…”

Ryan nudged Dante with his elbow. “This S.O.B. backed right into me.”

Dante nudged him back. “And I almost ended up *in* one of the baskets he was shooting.”

“I probably would have smacked you with one of them if I hadn’t been so worried about damaging your camera.”

I chuckled. “Priorities?”

“Damn right,” Ryan said. “That was a nice camera. I wasn’t going to fuck it up just because its owner couldn’t watch where he was going.”

“Not my fault someone else decided to kneel right in the middle of a busy market.”

Grinning mischievously, Ryan said, “You’ve never complained about when and where I kneel—”

“*Angel*.” Dante’s cheeks colored. To me, he said, “Sorry, this is why we usually don’t let him out in public.”

“He either trips you or embarrasses you?” I said.

“Basically.”

“So, why did you give up the photojournalism gig?” I asked. “That sounds like a dream job.”

Ryan shrugged with one shoulder. “It was a lot of fun, and we got to see some great places, but the constant traveling was getting exhausting.”

“And a bit dangerous, given some of the parts of the world we ended up in,” Dante said. “I decided I was done when a stray bullet went through our hotel window.”

“Whoa, yeah, that would probably be it for me,” I said.

“I did a few more trips alone.” Ryan inched a little closer to

Dante, settling against him until he could have rested his head on Dante's shoulder if he'd wanted to. "But it wasn't the same on my own, and after I had my third camera in four years stolen at gunpoint, I called it quits." He paused, glancing at Dante. "'Course, sometimes I wonder if wedding photography is just as dangerous."

Dante made a face. "No shit."

"That bad?"

Ryan laughed. "Okay, it's not really that bad."

"Usually," Dante added.

"Usually." Ryan grimaced. "Hell hath no fury like a pissed-off bride, let me tell you."

"Well, I certainly envy you for getting to travel like you did," I said. "I usually can't leave for long because of the horses, but I would kill to go to some of the places you did. Do you still travel much?"

"When it's off-peak season for weddings, hell yeah," Dante said.

"We take a lot of short trips throughout the year," Ryan said. "Skiing, hiking, that kind of thing, and we try to take at least one big trip every year."

"In fact, we finally got to Japan last year," Dante said. "Which was a blast, even after *someone* screwed up his ankle on Fuji."

Ryan shuddered. "Thank fuck we were on the way *down* the mountain at that point."

"It wasn't too bad, though." Dante moved his hand from Ryan's hair to his shoulder. "Once we got off the mountain anyway. Just meant we had to spend a couple of days in our hotel room until he could walk again."

Oh, I could think of worse things. "So, if it's not too personal," I said. "I've noticed you call him Angel. Nickname?"

Dante nodded. "I do try to remember to call him Ryan when we're working, but I'm so used to it, I forget."

Before I could ask if there was a story behind it—and knowing them, there had to be—a door opened and closed downstairs, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

I gritted my teeth. "And that would be Eli."

They both shot me puzzled looks.

Gesturing dismissively, I said, "Just the joys of living with an ex."

"An ex?" Dante's eyes widened.

I nodded. "Trust me, it's a long story."

"Hey, Jordan," Eli called from the other room, his footsteps thumping up the stairs. "Didn't I ask you to quit leaving the fucking —" He paused, lips tightening when he noticed I had company. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt." The irritation in his voice set my teeth on edge.

"It's okay." I struggled to keep my own annoyance out of my

voice. “You remember Dante and Ryan, right? From Jenny’s wedding?”

He offered them a tight-lipped smile. “Right, yes, I remember.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at the sneer in his tone.

“Did we meet you at the wedding?” Ryan cocked his head. Thumbing his chin, he glanced at Dante, then back at Eli. “Hell, we ran into so many people, it’s hard to keep track of everyone. Was—” He snapped his fingers. “Right, I didn’t recognize you without the tray in your hand.”

Eli raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Ryan tilted his head the other direction. “You were one of the waiters, weren’t you?”

Eli’s voice dipped to an indignant growl. “No, I was there with—”

“He’s a friend of the groom’s,” I said, struggling like hell not to laugh.

Eli threw me a glare, then looked at Ryan and gestured at me. “I was there with *him*.”

With what must have been the sweetest smile he could muster, Ryan said, “Well, that explains why I didn’t recognize you, since I was staring at him the entire time.”

Thank God I hadn’t been taking a drink just then. I nearly choked on my own breath anyway, and I couldn’t decide if it was because of Ryan’s swipe at Eli or the implied flirtation with me. It didn’t help when Dante made a casual gesture of scratching his jaw, which only served to draw my attention to his barely contained snickering.

Ryan, somehow, kept a perfectly straight face.

Eli set his jaw. “Well, I have a few things to take care of, so I’ll let you all get back to your conversation.” He narrowed his eyes at Ryan. “It was good seeing you two again.”

“Likewise.” Ryan’s innocent smile was almost too much, but I managed to contain my laughter until Eli had gone downstairs and closed his bedroom door.

Dante elbowed Ryan. “You’re a dick, you know that?”

“What?” Ryan batted his eyes and put his hands up. “What did I do?”

Dante tried and failed to look stern. “Sorry about him. He has no social graces.”

Wiping my eyes, I said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll hear about it later, but the expression on his face was fucking priceless.”

“Yeah, but we don’t usually make a habit of going to client’s houses and ripping on their housemates.” He tried to give Ryan a disapproving glare, but Ryan batted his eyes again, and all three of us cracked up.

Eventually, my ex’s intrusion was forgotten, and we went back to

our conversation. At some point, they had to bow out and get back to the studio to close things down, though I couldn't help noticing they were a little reluctant to leave. With a promise to call in a few days when the photos were ready—and yes, I was more than happy to come pick them up rather than have them mailed—they left.

From the living room window, I watched their taillights disappear down the driveway. A shiver ran down my spine. I swore their combined presence lingered on my tingling nerve endings.

Movement in the other room forced an aggravated breath from my lungs. Dante and Ryan may have been gone, but I certainly wasn't alone.

I went into the kitchen to find out what Eli was annoyed about earlier, before he'd realized I had guests.

"What were you asking me about?" I said. "When you came up the stairs?"

Eli paused, furrowing his brow, then shook his head. "Fuck, I don't remember."

"Guess it wasn't important, then," I said through my teeth. Obviously it was important enough to warrant getting on my case, even if he'd forgotten about it half an hour later.

"So how did the photo shoot go?" he asked.

"Good. I'll have to have them back another day to get action shots of Arturo," I said as I put the empty cans and bottles from earlier into the recycle bin. "He was still limping this morning, so I didn't want to push him."

Eli's lips thinned. "Oh, I'm sure having them come back would be *such* an imposition."

"It would be expensive," I said quietly.

"Maybe they'll give you a discount. You know, for a repeat customer." He sipped his beer. "Didn't realize you'd gotten so chummy with them."

I leaned against the counter and eyed him. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no, of course not." He eyed the living room, lip curling slightly as if he could still see Ryan sitting in there giving him hell. "They're not the friendliest in the world, are they?"

I shrugged. "I don't know; they were quite friendly with me."

Eli sniffed and, just before he took another drink, muttered, "So I noticed."

I thought about pressing the issue and admitting that yes, there had been some subtle-but-not-so-subtle flirtation going on, and yes, I wanted both of them to fuck me blind, but I wasn't in the mood to argue about it. So I changed the subject.

"Did you get a callback about that interview?"

Eli sighed. "No. And they said if they were interested, I'd hear

back by tonight." He gestured dismissively, then took a drink. "Guess it's back to square one."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "How about sending more than one application this time?"

He shifted his weight. "Actually, I've found something that's practically guaranteed—"

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that before," I said. "This last one was practically guaranteed, and so was the one before it."

He glared at me. "Listen, I'm doing the best I can here. The job market sucks. What do you want me to do?"

"Send more than one application at a time, for starters." I folded my arms across my chest. "And I told you, Jenny can get you in with a temp agency, and—"

"I'm not working at a temp agency," he said.

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because it's shit work? Because it's *temporary* shit work? And how the hell am I supposed to get an apartment when I'm on a temp contract?"

"Well, at least you'd have an income so you can pull your weight a bit while you're still here," I growled. "Or at the very least save some money for a security deposit on your next place." Then I put my hand up. "You know, I'm not going to argue about this anymore tonight. Just let me know when you find a fucking job." I started out of the kitchen.

"Why are you suddenly in such a hurry to kick me out, anyway?" he snapped.

I stopped and turned around. "Besides the fact that you've been dragging your feet about it for months?"

"I'm not dragging my feet."

"You're not putting in much effort to pick them up, either."

"Whatever." He slammed his beer can down on the counter hard enough to make me jump. "Well, if my presence is an inconvenience, just give me a heads up when you've got company over, and I'll make myself scarce."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. "So now I'm the bad guy because I had a couple of people over tonight? In my own house?"

"Oh, right, I forgot, it's *your* house."

I raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it?"

He exhaled hard. "Okay, it's just…it's weird… Coming home, finding…"

"Finding me talking with a couple of guys?" I growled. "Emphasis on 'couple', in case you hadn't picked up on that." *Bastards*.

He started to speak again, but I put my hand up again.

"No. No more. Not tonight." I shifted my weight. "Look, they were

just here to do some promo work for the horses, but even if they had been here for something else"—*Jesus Christ, I wish*—"the fact is, I need to move on. It's over, Eli. And as long as we're still living together, things might get weird. We'll just have to deal with it."

Eli dropped his gaze to the floor between us, and my gut twisted into knots. I hoped he wouldn't turn this into another conversation like the one we'd had last week and twice the week before. We weren't getting back together. We weren't going to give it another try. There was nothing left to work out.

God, Eli, just let me go.

Finally, he pulled another beer out of the fridge and stalked out of the kitchen. I listened until his heavy footsteps faded downstairs and his bedroom door banged shut. Then I let out my breath and rubbed my eyes. Sometimes it was like living with a damned kid.

I felt bad for him, I really did. He didn't want this to be over, and I hated the fact that this whole thing hurt him this much, but it needed to happen. I just wished he'd realize it wasn't going to stop hurting until he put in the effort to move on. I'd long ago learned if I dropped the façade of indifference, even for a moment, he'd see it as a glimmer of hope, so I forced myself to stay cold and terse. Lately, that hadn't been a terribly difficult thing to do, but I still felt for him.

I rubbed the back of my neck with both hands and sighed. I glanced at the clock. It was only a little after seven, so I had plenty of time to grab a shower and get something to eat before I had to go feed the horses.

Eli's presence still knotted my neck and shoulders. Downstairs, the muffled murmur of the television and the occasional creak of hardwood beneath feet kept me aware of his continued existence. That tension and distraction merely buzzed at the edges of my awareness, though. At the forefront of my mind was the pair who'd recently walked out my front door.

They may have been mutually spoken for, but that didn't stop me from fantasizing about them. And for that matter, it hadn't stopped them from…maybe flirting wasn't the word. Being suggestive? The memory of Ryan hitting his own hand with the crop raised goose bumps under my shirt. If he only knew what that had done to me. Or maybe he did. Maybe that's why he'd looked right at me and done it again.

I couldn't work out the dynamic of their relationship. There was a presence about both of them, something that wasn't intimidating, yet somehow was. And in spite of that, or maybe because of it, I'd been drawn to them from the moment I'd laid eyes on them at the wedding. While I couldn't put my finger on just why, I couldn't shake the feeling one of them could've made me kneel with a look.

That, or it was all in my head. Wishful thinking. Projecting my own desires onto two beautiful men.

"Hey, Dante," Ryan had said. *"Think we should get one of these?"*

Smack.

Dante had shrugged. *"Sure, we can get one, but who the hell are we going to hit with it?"*

Fuck. I wasn't projecting a goddamned thing. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what their dynamic was, but there was something there. Something I couldn't define, but wanted.

I shivered. They'd been here as professionals. I was their client, for God's sake. Their paying client, and yet I couldn't shake the feeling I'd also been their prey. I hadn't missed the hint of a smirk on Dante's face when Ryan hit his hand. Or the look that passed between them when I'd said I didn't take orders nearly often enough. They'd caught the scent. Taken my bait. Or maybe I'd taken theirs? Maybe Dante had thrown that question out there for a reason.

I may have been imagining it, but I'd swear they were feeling me out the way I was feeling them out.

A man could dream, anyway.

I told myself I was getting in the shower to soothe those tense muscles and drown out the sounds of Eli being alive, and it was true. Mostly, though, I just wanted to lose myself in thoughts of them without being distracted by him.

By the time I was under the rushing water, Eli probably could have come into the bathroom and tried to strike up a conversation, and I wouldn't have known. I was hard as hell, and just like the night I'd come home from their studio, I needed to relieve this tension.

I couldn't even focus on a single fantasy. My mind may as well have been channel-surfing through an endless library of pornos starring Ryan and Dante, and the only thing moving faster than the ever-changing *click-click-click* between those imaginary movies was my hand. I closed my eyes, clenching my jaw and stroking my cock as fast as I fucking could, imagining Ryan's cool breath on the wet skin of my neck, or Dante's hand in my hair while I sucked his cock, or Ryan stroking himself while Dante forced himself deeper inside me, or—

"Oh, fuck…" I whispered into the hiss of the shower.

Jesus, the thought of both of them naked. Stroking, sucking, kissing, fucking, looking at me, looking at each other with lust in their eyes, it didn't matter; everything I pictured them doing was perfect and hot and drove me insane. My legs shook so violently I wasn't sure they'd stay under me. Didn't particularly care. I could do this on my knees if I had to. Still, I braced my equally shaky free arm against the wall and kept right on stroking, imagining, going out of my goddamned mind.

Kneeling in front of Dante, sucking his cock, looking up at those stunning blue eyes. Pinned down while Ryan fucked me hard. Dante grabbing Ryan's ink-black hair and making him beg. Both of them making *me* beg, and oh, fuck, I would.

My breath caught. My balls tightened. My rhythm fell apart, reduced to irregular strokes with a trembling hand controlled by a Dante-Ryan-overwhelmed mind in search of release.

The crop in Ryan's hand. The crop on my skin. *More, more, more.* Leather. Pleasure. Pain. *Yes, fuck, yes*. Kneeling. Begging. Pleading. *God, yes, look at me like that*. Dante. Ryan. Me.

Everything went white. Second after second of pulsing, white-hot ecstasy that felt so good it hurt, and I kept my eyes screwed shut even after the intense tremors had passed. Just needed another minute or so. A few seconds, at least. A little while longer before I let myself back into reality, alone in my bathroom instead of between Ryan and Dante.

Finally, I opened my eyes. I took a few slow, deep breaths. I couldn't remember leaning my shoulder against the wall for support, but there it was. I pushed myself off the wall and closed my eyes again, letting hot water rush over my neck and shoulders. The tingling in my cock faded, my wrist and elbow ached, and though the mental channel-surfing had slowed, it didn't stop. They were dressed now, the two photographers on my mind, but no less mouthwatering. Exchanging subtle looks. Asking loaded questions. Gazes flicking toward each other. Crop to palm.

I hoped to God I hadn't imagined any of it.

Tell me you're the hunters, and I will gladly be your prey.

Chapter Five

Dante

At a little past nine, Angel was still on his computer, clicking away at the mouse while he furrowed his brow at something on the screen. His black hair was still damp from his recent shower, and like me, he hadn't bothered putting on more than a pair of jeans.

I leaned on the office doorframe, arms folded across my bare chest. "Being a workaholic again?"

"I'm always being a workaholic." His eyes flicked up from the screen, and he grinned as he gave me a quick down-up.

"Any chance I can pry you away from your toiling to help me make something for dinner?"

"I'll be done in a few." He focused on the monitor again, absently reaching up to pet Jade, his cat. She was the one piece of clutter he could put up with, and was perched on his desk. Even she had a specified place, though. She curled up in the bed he'd bought for her, but her tail still passive-aggressively encroached on his mouse pad.

"Uh-huh." I pushed myself off the doorframe and started toward him. "I've heard that before. You'd probably starve if I didn't drag you out of here once in a while."

He laughed. "You do the same thing. I don't want to hear it."

"Okay, but you're the one doing it tonight. And it's after nine."

"Really?" He looked at the screen, then blew out a breath. "Damn. No wonder I'm getting a headache."

"Definitely time to eat something, then." I kneaded his shoulders. "Come on. The work will still be here later."

He groaned, letting his head fall forward, and I knew I was winning. Still, he said, "Just a few more pictures. I'm almost done with the Harrigan wedding."

"You need to eat."

"I need to finish." He gave a halfhearted attempt to shrug my hands away, but I pressed my thumbs in just below the base of his neck. He exhaled. "You're evil."

"No, if I was evil, I'd do this." I leaned down and kissed behind his ear. Moving down his neck to his shoulder, I whispered, "Don't make me beg, Angel."

He shivered, then reached back and slid his hand around the back of my neck. When he turned his head, I kissed him.

He licked his lips. "Keep doing this, the only place you're going to convince me to go is the bedroom."

I kissed him again, lightly this time, and released him. "We'll get there too. Now come on."

“You are such a fucking tease.”

“Just giving you a little preview of what we’ll be doing later.” I paused. “After we’ve eaten something.”

“Yes, Mother.” His hand went back to the mouse. “Give me just a few minutes. I’ll be right there.”

“Uh-huh. Heard that before.” I tugged at his shoulders. “Step away from the computer, Angel.”

“But…just a few more…”

“I’ll start moving stuff around on your desk.”

He put his hands up. “Okay, okay, you win.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He pushed his chair back and stood. Jade peered up at him and made that weird noise that was her version of a meow. Angel shrugged. “Sorry. Daddy’s being mean and says I have to go eat.”

Looking right at him, she kneaded the edge of her bed and purred loud enough for both of us to hear.

I hooked my hand around Angel’s elbow. “She’s trying to lure you back. Don’t listen to her.”

“But, but—”

“Kitchen. Now.”

The siren’s call of work and the cat were no match for his hunger and my insistence, and Angel went into the kitchen with me. This wasn’t an unusual routine for us. We were workaholics, and it was a safe bet we both would have starved to death if we didn’t live together. That, and Angel would have been late for work half the time because he never wanted to disturb his cat in the morning when he needed to get up and she couldn’t be bothered. It was no wonder she didn’t like me.

In the kitchen, we chatted while we prepped dinner, and like we always did, took advantage of any opportunity to touch each other. When he needed the pepper from the spice rack over my head, he rested his hand on my lower back while he reached above me. When I wanted something out of the drawer beside him, I made sure to stop long enough to push his hair aside and kiss the back of his neck. Lingering eye contact, a hand on an ass, a long kiss just for the hell of it. Whenever we cooked together, it was rife with verbal and tactile flirting, but there was a little more insistence in the way we made contact tonight. An undercurrent of “just wait until we get into bed”.

Which is why it didn’t surprise me at all that it didn’t take long for the conversation to move to Jordan.

“I swear he’s a sub,” Angel said. “He has to be.”

“That, or he wants to be.”

“Too bad he’s got that cunt hanging around.” He smacked my hand when I reached for a piece of the cheese he was about to grate. I

triumphantly held up my prize, and he threw me a playful glare before we both went back to prepping food. Angel went on, “What was that guy’s name again?”

“Asshole, wasn’t it?”

Angel paused, furrowing his brow. “Eli, actually.”

I shrugged. “Eli, asshole, cunt. All sounds the same.” I threw the bell peppers I’d just diced into the pot of sauce. “I wonder what their deal is, anyway.”

He eyed the sauce but didn’t say anything. He measured, I didn’t, and we’d long ago agreed not to argue about it. He went back to grating cheese. “I don’t know what their deal is, but they seem to like each other about as well as Eli likes us.”

“Can’t think why he doesn’t like us.” I glanced at him. “Though you probably could have been a *bit* less of a dick to him.”

Angel looked at me through his lashes and the fringe of black hair falling over his eyes. “Come on, he was asking for it. And Jordan thought it was funny, so…” He shrugged.

I rolled my eyes, trying my damnedest not to crack a smile.

“Oh, honestly, Dante,” Angel said. “It was funny. Admit it.”

“Okay, okay, it was. But somehow I don’t think it made Jordan’s evening with the bastard pleasant.”

“I highly doubt his evening with him was going to be pleasant anyway,” he said with a flippant gesture. “At least he got a laugh out of it.”

“True.” I idly stirred the sauce, replaying the interactions between Jordan and Eli in my head. “Man, I’m dying of curiosity, though. About the whole thing.”

“Yeah, me too. I mean, he said the douche is his ex.”

“Yet they still live together?” I said, moving to the cutting board while the sauce simmered.

“It does happen.” Angel put aside the grated cheese and reached down to dig a pan out of the cabinet. “I lived with Kathleen for a while even after we’d filed.”

“Okay, true.” I looked up from dicing tomatoes. “But a pair of broke college kids making do so they don’t starve is a little different, you know? Obviously someone over there is doing fairly well financially.”

“True.”

“And you two didn’t want to claw each other’s faces off when you had to be in the same room.”

“There is that.” He paused. “Seems like Jordan’s the one who can’t stand Eli.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

He chuckled. “No kidding.”

"I wonder why they were both at the wedding," I said. "If he's that much of a punk, I'd have left his ass at home."

"Yeah, really."

We were both quiet for a few minutes, focusing on getting dinner put together. Then I broke the silence.

"Douchebag ex or not, I would kill to find out if Jordan's really a sub. I'm telling you, he's got sub written all over him."

"You think?"

"He made those comments about wishing he could hand over control to someone else." I stirred the sauce again and glanced at Angel. "Said something about it at the studio the other night too."

"Yeah, but what business owner hasn't? Even we need a break once in a while."

"True," I said. "But how many subs have we been with who were business owners, CEOs, that sort of thing? It's practically a job requirement."

He laughed. "Aside from us, you mean?"

"Well, yeah, but since when do we ever play by the rules?"

"Good point." He carefully measured the cheese he'd grated earlier and handed it to me. As he went to the sink to wash his hands, he said, "I think you're right, though. I've been getting that vibe off him since the wedding."

"At least that means I'm not hallucinating."

"I don't know about *that*." Angel picked up a dish towel to dry his hands. "And in all seriousness, I keep wondering if I'm just seeing it because I want to see it."

"Yeah, me too. Any idea how we could broach the subject with him?"

Hanging the dishtowel back on its rack, Angel said, "Wait until he comes in to pick up his pictures, and slip 'are you kinky and can we fuck you?' into the conversation?"

"Of *course*." I pretended to smack my forehead with my palm. "Why didn't I think of such a thing?"

"Well, it's better than beating around the bush."

"There's a lot of room between beating around the bush and crashing into it with a Mack truck, setting it on fire, and nuking it for good measure."

Angel showed his palms and batted his eyes. "At least then we'd know."

"Uh-huh. Except he *is* still our client. If he was just some guy we'd met, it'd be one thing, but he's not. And he's the brother of a client too."

"True." He opened the oven and slid the pan onto the rack. Over his shoulder, he said, "I suppose Jennifer might not let us shoot her

wedding if she knows we made a pass at her brother."

"Funny. You know what I meant." I shot him a playful glare when he turned around.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Angel pursed his lips, drumming his fingers on the counter. "I'm just trying to think how we can approach him without being too forward, not to mention unprofessional."

"Well, we'll come up with something," I said as we cleaned the counter and cutting boards. "Just need to figure out how to subtly feel him out a little more."

When the kitchen was tidied to his satisfaction, Angel went to the sink to wash his hands again. "So, how do we *subtly* feel him out and see if he'll let us feel him up?"

"Or tie him up."

As he dried his hands, he said, "Think he'd go for that?"

"God, I hope so." I put my arms around Angel's waist and kissed the side of his neck. All these years together, and his skin against mine still made my breath catch. "Well, whether it's Jordan or anyone else, we *really* need another sub."

"Mm-hmm." He put his hands over mine and tilted his head to expose more of his neck.

"I know you've been missing that," I whispered. "Having someone to tie up. And take orders from you."

"God, yes." His voice edged toward a moan. "And I think someone *else* has been missing a thing or two about a sub, no?"

I shivered and drew him closer. "Maybe I have."

"Maybe?" He turned around in my arms. Trailing his fingertips up my back, he whispered, "How long has it been, anyway? Since you've gotten to be inside someone?"

I bit my lip, trying and failing not to shiver again. I didn't know how long it had been. Too long, that much I knew.

Angel bent and kissed my neck. "You'd love to fuck him, wouldn't you?"

"Damn right I would."

"Think he likes it rough?"

"God, I hope so," I said in a hoarse whisper that was almost a growl.

"I can just imagine watching you fuck him." He ran his hands up and down my sides. "Think he moans when he comes? Or roars?"

"I have no idea," I said. "But I want to find out."

"Me too." He held my face in both hands and kissed me hungrily. "I do know how *you* sound when you come, though."

"You do, don't you?"

"Mm-hmm." Another long, desperate kiss. "Think I might want to hear it again."

“Oh really?”

“Yes.” His hand drifted down my neck, my chest, my sides. “Like, *now*.” He hooked his fingers in my front pockets, using them to pull my hips against his own. I wrapped my arms around him, and his kiss made me weak just like it always did. After a moment, his hands left my pockets and slid up my back, my skin almost sizzling from the heat of his palms. Our kitchen was completely silent except uneven hisses of breath and the whisper of denim brushing over denim between our erect cocks.

Even when we came up for air, I couldn’t catch my breath. Judging by the way his shoulders rose and fell, and the warm-cool-warm air against my lips, neither could he.

Then his eyes darted toward the window, and when they met mine again, that trademark mischievous grin materialized on his lips. “Hmm, maybe we shouldn’t do this in front of the window.”

“Why the hell not?” I ran my fingers through his cool, still-damp hair. “I’ll kiss my boyfriend in my kitchen whenever I damn well please.”

He laughed and pulled me closer. “Yeah, but Mrs. Franklin might have heart failure.”

“Then she shouldn’t be looking through our window, should she?”

“Hmm, good point.”

I rested my hands on the back of his neck, and our lips brushed when I spoke. “We *could* find a better place to do this, though.”

“Such as?”

“Somewhere with condoms and lube within easy reach.”

Angel glanced over his shoulder at the oven timer. “And wouldn’t you know it?” He licked his lips when our eyes met again. “We have plenty of time.”

“More than enough time.” I held on to the back of his neck, kissed him passionately and dragged him out of the kitchen with me.

Chapter Six

Angel

Dante pulled me from the kitchen into the hallway, but as soon as I'd regained my balance, I took over.

With my body weight against him and my hands on his hips, I shoved him up against the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him. We both stopped, and for a moment, just stared at each other. Breathing hard, eyes narrowing, we stared at each other.

He licked his lips. I did the same.

In an instant, we were back to passionate kissing. He pulled me against him, I pushed him against the wall, and we clawed at each other. Without shirts to hold on to, we grabbed on to whatever we could—hair, hips, belt loops—and forced each other down the hall.

Once we were in the bedroom, we pulled ourselves off each other just long enough to get out of our clothes. Times like this, I didn't care if anything was tidy or cluttered or just thrown the fuck on the floor. Clothes needed to come off, and wherever they landed, oh well. Thank God neither of us had on more than a pair of jeans anyway. We hadn't even bothered with boxers or belts, and in mere seconds, my jeans were on the floor somewhere near his and I was in bed with him.

He managed to get the upper hand for a brief moment, but before the sheets beneath me had even had a chance to warm from my body heat, I had him on his back. Every kiss was more desperate and breathless than the last, and every time his cock brushed mine, I wanted him that much more.

I pinned him on his back again and didn't give him a chance to fight back before I slid my hand between us and wrapped my fingers around his cock. He exhaled, squirming beneath me.

"Like that?" I murmured, bending to kiss his neck.

"You know I do."

"God, I love it when you're this horny." I nipped his earlobe, shivering when he did. "I think *someone's* been thinking filthy thoughts tonight."

Dante bit his lip and slid his hand up into my hair, tightening his grip when I did the same to his cock.

I kissed just above his collarbone. "You've been thinking about fucking him, haven't you?"

Dante groaned softly.

"I'll bet you'd like to have him cuffed and on his knees, wouldn't you?" I squeezed him harder and stroked faster, waiting for that groan and shudder before I kissed below his ear. "Would you make him beg for your cock, Dante?"

"Fuck…"

"Exactly." I grinned against his skin. "You'd make him, wouldn't you? Just to torture him until you gave him what he wanted?"

Dante pulled in a sharp breath, shuddering against me.

I raised my head, forcing myself to keep my hand and voice steady while I watched him furrow his brow and bite his lip and look so fucking deliciously turned on. "Would you do that to him?"

"God, yes."

"While I watched?"

He whimpered, his cock twitching in my hand.

"Tell me, Dante," I murmured, pausing to kiss him, "would you cuff him, make him beg, then fuck him while he's helpless to do anything except take it?"

He shut his eyes tight and squirmed against me, like he was trying to fuck my hand.

I let my lower lip drag across his, then whispered, "Would you—"

"Fuck me."

"First, I want—"

"Angel, please," he said, almost moaning. "I want… I need… *please*…" He licked his lips and met my eyes, his wide with the most mouthwatering desperation. "Please, fuck me. Now."

God help me, I almost came right then and there. Dante didn't beg any more than I did, and when he did, fuck, it turned me on. Without another word, I leaned away and reached into my nightstand drawer for the condoms and lube. I sat on the edge of the bed and got the condom open and on as fast as my hands—*fuck, fuck, I need to be inside him, oh God, right fucking now, fuck, I want him*—could manage.

Once I had the condom and lube on, I turned back to him, as desperate to be inside him as he was to have me. I was about to tell him to get up on his knees, but he caught me off guard, grabbing me and throwing me on my back. I had just enough time to look up at him, blinking in surprise just like he had when I'd shoved him up against the wall, before he pinned my arms down and kissed me. Growling against his mouth, I tried to free my hands, my fingers clawing the air in search of his skin, his hair, his hips.

"Let me fuck you," I said.

He kissed me again. Hard, aggressive, violent, just like he knew would drive me crazy, just like I wanted to fuck him, fuck him, fuck him, *Dante, please*…

Finally, the teasing bastard sat up, then rose enough to let me guide my cock to him. With my other hand on his hip, he lowered himself onto me. A low moan escaped his lips, and he let his head fall forward as I slid deeper inside him. I rested both hands on his hips while he slowly rose and fell a few times, kept them there while he

picked up speed. Jesus, he felt incredible. He made me dizzy, just like the first time and every time.

I moved my hands up to his chest and teased his nipples with my thumbs. He bit his lip, furrowing his brow and riding me harder, and my back arched under us.

Just like that, my mouth couldn't figure out how to say. *Don't stop, Dante, just like that. Oh, fuck, you're gonna make me—*

He stopped.

I groaned with frustration. "Dante, don't—"

He cut me off with a deep kiss.

"I want you to get behind me," he whispered. "And fuck me hard."

"Then you'd better turn around." I thought he might make me beg. Maybe he thought I'd make him beg. It wasn't below either of us to do just that.

Not tonight, though. We both needed this too badly to tease each other anymore.

He slowly rose off me, both of us exhaling hard as my cock slid out of him. Then he turned around, and I wasted no time getting behind him and back inside him. Someone groaned, someone shivered, and I fucked him hard, fast, thrusting with all the violent desperation a lover like him aroused in me. Muscles burned and trembled and ached, and I didn't care because I was inside Dante, deep inside Dante, fucking Dante, yes, yes, Dante.

He rocked back against me, forcing me deeper and demanding I fuck him faster. Then slower. Faster again. *Harder*. He may have been on his knees, he may have been taking it from me, but he was never, ever submissive.

I held his hips tighter, biting my lip as every stroke sent me closer to letting go.

"Oh, God…" I groaned. "Just like that, I'm almost…" A shudder rippled up my spine. Dante took over, slamming back against me, and I matched him thrust for thrust until I couldn't take another second of it. I dug my fingers into his hips. Held my breath. Threw my head back. Fucking lost it. Jesus Christ, no one could make me come like Dante, and I couldn't release the air in my lungs or draw more in until the last few aftershocks had passed. Then, and only then, I groaned and slumped over him.

We weren't done, though. If I let myself relax too long, that post-orgasmic sleepiness would set in, and Dante hadn't come yet.

Steadying myself with a hand on his hip, I pulled out. Then Dante collapsed onto his side, and I sat back on my heels. We were both sweating, both breathless, and just the sight of his hard cock made me dizzier still.

I rested my weight on one shaking arm and leaned down to kiss him lightly. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

He smiled. “I’ll be right here.”

After one more kiss—okay, two more, and a third for good measure—I got up and went into the bathroom to get rid of the condom. I quickly washed my hands, dried them, and when I came back to bed, Dante was waiting. He reclined against the pillow, one hand behind his head and the other slowly stroking his own cock.

I joined him in bed and gently pushed his hand out of the way. “You weren’t taking care of yourself without me, were you?”

He batted his eyes. “Absolutely not. Just warming myself up for you, since you’re going to suck my cock.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that right?”

“Yes, it is.”

With a hand on his shoulder, I forced him all the way onto his back. Still stroking his cock, I kissed him lightly, but kept my lips out of reach when he tried for more. “And when did I agree to do this?”

“Were you going to let me get blue balls?”

I laughed. “Of course not. But I haven’t decided how I’m going to make you come yet.” I squeezed him a little harder, just enough to make him suck in a breath and bite his lip. “Maybe I just want to do this, hmm?”

“Except I want you to suck me off.”

“Do you?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I stroked him faster, and all he did was groan.

I kissed him again. “I think you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but…” His back arched. “Oh, fuck, Angel, I want you to suck my cock.” He took a breath. Licked his lips. Screwed his eyes shut. “Please, Angel…”

“Well, since you asked nicely.” I released his cock and pushed myself up on my arms so I was on top of him. I kissed his neck, working my way down to his collarbone, then to his chest.

I flicked my tongue across his nipple, watching him close his eyes and gasp. He combed his trembling fingers through my hair, letting his nails drag gently across my scalp, and I shivered, exhaling against his skin as I continued working my way down to his abs. I trailed light kisses and the occasional flutter of the tip of my tongue down the center of his abs, then to his side. I deliberately let my stubble graze his skin. Blew a warm breath here, a cool one there. He squirmed and trembled, and as I drew closer to his cock, he whimpered softly.

“Fuck, Angel, you’re such a tease,” he growled.

“I am.” I drew a circle with the tip of my tongue just inches from his cock. “And you like it, don’t you?”

"It's frustrating as hell."

"Mm-hmm." I kissed my way closer to him. "Do you want me to stop?"

He released a low groan, and I laughed again when my breath on his skin made him gasp.

"No," he whispered. "Don't you dare fucking stop."

"That's what I thought."

Before he could say anything more, I flicked my tongue across the base of his cock. His whole body seized, and I was pretty sure he swore a few times before I did it again. And again. And once more just to get his teeth grinding with frustration. I ran the tip of my tongue all the way from the base of his cock to the head, just slowly enough to drive him crazy before I finally went down on him the way he wanted me to.

I took him a fraction of an inch at a time. Down a little, back up, down a little more, letting him know who was in control right then. Every time I came down, his hips moved in a subtle imitation of how mine had earlier when I'd tried to get deeper inside him. The hand in my hair didn't press down hard enough to make me choke but *just* enough to let me know he wasn't *asking* me to take more of him.

We always danced along this razor-thin line of mutual control. Neither of us gained or relinquished the upper hand for long. I'd take control, he'd take it back. He'd give me some control, I'd give it back. I led, he led, and together we'd reach our destination.

But we both craved surrender. Complete, unhesitating surrender. Total submission. And if I'd read him right, Jordan might be the one to give it to us. The very thought sent a shudder up my spine, and I stroked Dante faster, took him a little deeper, groaning softly against his cock when he arched his back and moaned.

I usually had no trouble focusing entirely on what I was doing and nothing else, but tonight, other images flickered at the corners of my consciousness: Jordan sucking Dante's cock like I did now. Jordan on his knees, pleading for the right to make one of us come, for the privilege of coming himself. Jordan pushed up against a bed, a chair, a wall, begging Dante to fuck him fast and hard the way I knew Dante ached to fuck *someone*.

I deep-throated Dante. His entire body trembled, and the quiet whimper he released sent goose bumps prickling all the way down my spine. His cock twitched against my tongue. I moved faster, gave it to him just the way I knew he loved it.

"Fuck, just…oh God…" His fingers trembled in my hair. "Jesus, Angel, fuck…" He trailed off into a groan, then sucked in a breath, tensed, and a second later, hot, salty semen hit my tongue.

I didn't stop until his grip on my hair tightened enough to keep

me from moving, and when I did stop, he exhaled hard and relaxed. He put his hand over his eyes as he caught his breath.

I came up to the pillow to join him, propping myself up on one arm and trailing my fingers down the side of his face. He lifted his hand off his eyes.

"I so needed that," he slurred.

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "You *always* need a blowjob."

"And you always deliver, so we're in good shape, aren't we?"

"So we are." I lowered my head for a long, gentle kiss. He wrapped his arms around me, and I sank down to him, sliding my hands under his back. Our skin was slick with sweat, which meant we'd probably end up in the shower again before bed. Together, most likely.

When I met his eyes, the hunger was sated for now, but still alive and well. Yeah, we'd be taking another shower tonight, and it would be together. Another late night in the Morgan-James house, of that I had no doubt. Even after all this time, it was a wonder we ever left the bed, never mind the house.

Dante cocked his head. "What?"

"Hmm?"

"You looked like you were about to laugh about something."

I grinned. "Just thinking."

He lifted an eyebrow. "About?"

"About whether or not we stand a chance of getting any sleep tonight?"

Dante chuckled. "Maybe we'll just have to go to bed early, then." He combed his fingers through my hair, deliberately running the edges of his nails along my scalp until I shivered. Then he added, "You know, so we have more time to try to get to sleep."

"Yeah, because spending more time in bed is always a good way to get more sleep in this house."

He raised his head to kiss me. "Well, it looked good on paper."

"And in practice?" I said against his lips.

"Probably not so much."

"Probably? Yeah, right." I laughed and kissed him again. Though our banter had been playful as always, this was another gentle, tender kiss that went on for a long moment. We held on to each other, stroking each other's skin and just letting this go on.

When I finally convinced myself to break the kiss, I pushed myself up on one arm and ran the backs of my fingers down his cheek. He reached up to touch my face, and I kissed his palm.

"I love you," he whispered.

I smiled. "I love you too."

"Even if I tell you that yes, I have been thinking dirty thoughts

about Jordan all day?"

A tingle worked its way right through me. "Especially if you tell me that."

"That's what I thought." He kissed me, just teasing my lips with his own for a long moment before he said, "And to answer your question from earlier, you're damn right I want to fuck him while you watch."

"Jesus, we could have so much fun with him if he was game." I shifted onto my side. "Think there's any way we can get his attention without betraying our flawless image of professionalism?"

Dante eyed me. "Oh, I don't think *that* part will be a problem."

"So we might as well just—"

"No." He pursed his lips. "We'll figure it out, but subtlety is the name of the game here, okay?"

I released a sigh of mock exasperation. "Fine. We'll do it *your* way."

"I knew you'd see reason." He kissed me. "Now why don't we go eat before dinner burns?"

"Good idea." I sat up. "The sooner we eat, the sooner we can get back in bed."

Chapter Seven

Jordan

"Mr. Steele?"

I looked up as Kendra came back into Dante and Ryan's lobby. "Hmm?"

"This client is going to take a bit longer than they thought," she said. "But they should be out soon."

"It's okay. I'm not in any hurry."

She picked her jacket up off the chair. "It's time for me to get out of here, though, so I'll leave you in their capable hands."

I wish. I just smiled. While she gathered her things and shut down her computer, I leaned forward and looked at the portfolios on the table in front of me. I'd been through them all before, but they were something to occupy idle hands and a not-so-idle mind.

Bridal. Landscape. Commercial. Senior Portrait. 18 & Over.

Wait. Eighteen and over? I raised an eyebrow. That wasn't there before. I glanced at the closed side door, then at the leather-bound black book that just begged me to have a look. A little peek. After all, I was certainly on the "over" end of that spectrum. Curiosity finally got the best of me, so I picked up the black portfolio and sat back.

Flipping through the pages, two things were immediately clear. One, the reason for the age restriction. Though no pictures showed anything that would be deemed pornographic, they were more than a little suggestive. Models were dressed in everything from leather to strategically placed shadows. Some posed alone, some with others.

The second thing that became clear right away was that, when it came to this kind of work, Dante and Ryan were fucking *talented*. Holy hell. I didn't know much about photography, but I'd always loved erotic artwork, and these were absolutely breathtaking. I had to stare at a couple of them for a while just because the angles and shadows intrigued me as much as the eroticism and, in some cases, the visible sexual tension.

"Good night, Mr. Steele." Kendra's voice made me jump, and I hadn't even realized she'd crossed the room from her desk to the front door.

I smiled at her. "Have a good one."

"Will do." She cocked her head and furrowed her brow, eyeing the portfolio in my lap. "Oh, I didn't realize they'd left that book out. We usually keep that one put away in case someone brings their kids in."

I forced a quiet laugh. "I wondered about that."

"Well, if you don't mind, could you give it to one of the boys when they come out?" She clicked her tongue. "I tell them to put their

toys away, but…" She gestured at it again.

"I'll make sure to give it to them."

"Great, thanks. Good night."

"Good night."

A moment later, the door banged shut behind her, and I was alone with the black book of beautiful risqué photos.

One in particular held my attention. It was a close-up of a hand lifting a male model's chin. Long, fine fingers, but still masculine, with a few dark hairs sprinkled across the back of his hand and wrist. Judging by the angles, the model must have been quite a bit lower than whoever was touching his face. Sitting, perhaps. Maybe kneeling. The model's eyes were so intense, gazing up with nothing short of reverence at…someone. Every detail was crystal clear, from the crisp lines of the tattooed bracelet to the dusting of stubble that nearly made me want to run my fingers over the picture in search of the coarse texture.

The book was page after page of similar work. Simple images that left a lot to the imagination, though the suggestion of what went on outside each frame was definitely there.

Ryan and Dante were obviously quite open-minded too, at least as far as what they'd shoot for their clients. For all I knew, they had a completely boring, missionary-with-the-lights-off sex life on their own, but they didn't seem to have any qualms about photographing those with somewhat more exotic tastes.

The side door opened, and I damn near jumped out of my skin. I didn't have time to conspicuously close the portfolio and put it back on the table, so when Ryan appeared, there was no pretending I hadn't been flipping through it.

"Hey, we're just about done in here, but—" Ryan paused, looking at the book I had in my lap. He grinned. "I see you found some of our more questionable work." He didn't seem surprised in the least. Certainly not put off.

I glanced down at the portfolio. "Yeah, guess I did. This is amazing work, by the way."

"Thanks," he said. "We, um, have another book of similar work, but we keep it under lock and key. I'm sure you can figure out why."

I gulped. "A bit racier than this?"

"Just a bit." Those intense, see-right-through-you eyes narrowed slightly. "I can get it out if you want to see it."

If curiosity had gotten the best of me before, it had me by the balls now. I cleared my throat. "Um, sure, yeah."

"It's, um…" He chewed his lip. "Well, if it won't make you think strangely of us." He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm assuming there aren't any pictures involving livestock?"

A laugh burst out of him. “Good God, no.” He paused. “We post *those* on the Internet.”

I chuckled. “I’m sure. Well, in that case, I’d love to see it.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and reached for something below the receptionist’s desk. A lock crunched, then clicked, and a drawer slid open. When he stood, he held a book similar to the one in my hand.

Dante’s voice came from the other room. “Angel, you coming?”

“Be right there.” Ryan came around the desk and handed me the book. “Enjoy.”

“Will do.”

Before he let it go, something on his wrist caught my eye. Something unusual about his watchband.

No, not the watchband.

The skin under the watchband, which bore the same tattoo I’d seen in that shot of the hand lifting the model’s chin. I glanced up at him. He let go of the portfolio, and when he stepped away, I’ll be damned if he didn’t wink.

Then he was gone again, the door closing behind him with a quiet click.

Alone again with a portfolio and my heartbeat, I stared at the unassuming black leather cover of the book he’d given me. *18 & Over—By Request Only*. Just what went in here that was too much for the other book?

Finally, I flipped it open.

From the first page, my mouth watered. I’d been curious for some time about all things kink and BDSM but had kept it to myself. Eli sure as hell wouldn’t have gotten involved in something so “weird” as he called it. Obviously Dante and Ryan weren’t so inhibited, at least as far as their work was concerned.

I had never seen a more beautiful collection of kinky erotic art. Women meticulously, lovingly bound in ropes and chains. A naked, inked male model kneeling in front of another man clad in black leather. Welts scoring a muscular, bare back that was arched in what must have been ecstasy. That, or pain. Maybe both.

The pictures were mostly black-and-white, though a few had a single color to draw attention to one part of the image. A female model was naked, hands bound behind her back, and the only color in the photo was the bright red blindfold. Another image showed a woman’s nails raking across skin, and her nails were the same shade as the previous woman’s blindfold.

One particular model appeared in several photos in a row. He was fucking gorgeous—obviously divided a significant portion of his time between a gym and a tattoo shop—and he was naked in all of them

except for a gag in one, a blindfold in a few others. In one, he knelt, looking up at someone off camera with that same reverent expression I'd seen in the other model's face in the previous portfolio.

I turned another page, and the next photo was the same model… and Dante.

Taking in the black-and-white image, I couldn't breathe.

Dante stood behind the model. The only clothing on either of them was the blindfold on the model. They were both shirtless, and the photo extended just far enough over their hips to imply they didn't wear anything else. The model tilted his head back and to the side, exposing more of his neck, and Dante's lips nearly touched him. The only color in the photo was Dante's vivid blue eyes, which were focused right on the camera. I swore he looked right at me, and I swore I could feel his breath on my neck like I was the blindfolded tattooed naked model in front of him.

Remembering I had to breathe to stay conscious, I turned the page. Same model, also with Dante, zoomed in closer this time. Now Dante's eyes were closed and his lips were near the model's ear, parted as if he were speaking. The way the model bit his own lip made me wonder just what Dante had said to him.

On another page, the camera zoomed in on Ryan holding what appeared to be a riding crop across the back of his neck with both hands. He inclined his head just so, looking at the camera—at Dante? —with an expression of "Yeah, you want some of this."

"*Hey, Dante, think we should get one of these?*"

Smack.

"*Sure, we can get one, but who the hell are we going to hit with it?*"

I shifted in my chair. It wasn't just the delicious suggestiveness of the images. It was *them*. It didn't surprise me at all that they both modeled. Two men with bodies like that and an eye for erotic photography; if that wasn't a natural progression, I didn't know what was.

Seeing them like this was oddly voyeuristic, as if I wasn't just seeing posed images but peeking in through their bedroom door. My heart rate would have been no higher had I stumbled across a sex tape of theirs on the Internet or walked in to see them in a compromising position. And I hadn't even seen much of them in the pictures. Just a ribbon of skin here, a glimpse of muscle there, a *look*. The raw sensuality in every photo, whether they'd taken it or featured in it, sent shivers down my spine. I already knew the two of them were attractive as fuck, but that was before I immersed myself in displays of their physical beauty, their creativity and their unashamed sexuality.

And because I liked to torment myself with tantalizing images of two gorgeous men I couldn't have, I kept turning the pages.

I reached the end of the portfolio and couldn't take my eyes off the last picture. I couldn't fucking breathe. Out of all of the images I'd seen so far, this one was hands down the most arousing.

It was Dante, partially in profile, from his bare collarbones up. His head was thrown back, lips pulled back in a grimace, eyes screwed shut, the cords standing out from his neck. A single drop of sweat glistened on his temple, and while it may have just been a trick of the light, I was sure there was a shimmer of tears just below his eyes.

The instant before release, frozen in time.

I shivered and closed the portfolio, but the images were burned into my mind, especially the last one. That one couldn't have been fake. Not unless Dante was a hell of an actor, anyway, because the about-to-break tension in that image had crackled right off the page. I set both books on the table and sat back. I closed my eyes, letting my head rest against the wall as I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down.

Yeah, right. There was only one way I was going to relieve this tension, and this wasn't exactly the time or place. *Come on, think of something. Something besides Dante on the verge of orgasm or Ryan with that glint in his eyes. Something*.

At least I always had my trusty mental bucket of cold water on standby. Since Eli and I had spent half the morning arguing again, I had something to focus on besides wondering who'd been doing what to Dante when that picture was taken. I rubbed my eyes and forced my mind back into the kitchen to replay standing on opposite sides of the island with Eli and sniping, bitching, going through the same shit we'd been through a million times before.

"What do you want me to do?" he'd growled. "Show you my applications and the confirmation e-mails when they're sent? Do you want to initial my homework every night while you're at it?"

"No, I have no desire to be your fucking parent." Oh, I'd fought to keep my temper in check, and it was harder every time. "But I need to know you're making an effort to get a damned job and an apartment."

"So you don't trust me?"

Well, no, now that you mention it. Which is why we're sleeping in separate rooms and I'm trying to move on. "Just do whatever you have to do. Get a job and get a place of your own."

And at that point, I'd walked out. By the time Bravado and I came back from a nice therapeutic trail ride, Eli's car was gone. At least he was out of my hair for the rest of the day, but somehow I doubted he'd spent his time applying for jobs. Maybe he went out and got laid. Couldn't blame him if he did. I wondered how long it would take for him to convince his next piece of ass to let him move in. Probably not as long as it was currently taking for his *last* piece of ass to get him to

move *out*.

The side door opened, and…so much for my efforts to let whatshisname who lived with me distract me.

Dante appeared, and while we exchanged polite greetings, my brain went completely blank except for *that* picture. Instead of the flickering porno channel-surfing my mind had gone through when I'd fantasized about Ryan and Dante the last few nights, it was one static image. One crackling, mouthwatering image.

He said something, but I couldn't comprehend it because all I could think of was him on the verge of an orgasm. Right there. Right fucking there. Just about to let go. Right on—

"Jordan?" He raised an eyebrow.

I blinked. "Sorry, what?"

"I said, come on up and we can go over your album."

"Right, right." I stood, thanking several gods I'd had the forethought to wear an untucked shirt today. I picked up the two portfolios and brought them with me. "I assume you don't want to leave these out?"

He looked at the books in my hand, and his cheeks darkened a little. He glanced toward the side door as if shooting Ryan a glare right through the wall. "Thanks," he said quietly, taking them from me.

"That's some incredible work," I said. "I've always loved that kind of photography."

"Oh. Thanks." He smiled, though some of the extra color lingered on his face. After he'd dropped the portfolios on one of the desks, he sat across from me at Kendra's desk. He clicked the mouse a few times and entered something on the keyboard. Probably a password or something, and I didn't notice *at all* the way his long fingers moved across the keys with practiced agility.

"Did you want to look over them while you're here?" His voice made me jump. Hopefully he didn't notice, and if he did, he didn't let on.

I cleared my throat. "Oh, I can do that at home." *When I can actually concentrate*. "Don't want to take up too much of your time."

He shrugged. "Your call. You can always e-mail me if you don't like the way one's cropped or whatever. Let me just print the invoice and all of that crap." He clicked the mouse, and a printer nearby whirred to life.

As Dante got up to go to the printer, Ryan emerged from the side room, carrying on a conversation with a female model who must have been in her early twenties. He glanced at me, and the devilishness in his fleeting grin rivaled the moment he'd given me that wink earlier. I shifted in my chair. He went back to seeing his client out, and I went

back to trying to keep my heart rate within safe parameters. Whether he did it on purpose or not, he knew *just* how to set my nerve endings tingling without even touching me.

Speaking of men who fucked with my head and senses just by existing, Dante came back and took a seat across from me. The papers in his hand sort of drew my attention back to business or whatever it was I was supposed to be thinking about. It wasn't like I was staring at his hand rather than the papers in it, or watching the way his lips moved rather than listening to the words coming out of them.

He slid the invoice across the desk, then flipped open a file folder and pulled out some various forms. Though we'd taken care of it the first time I came in, Dante wanted to make sure we had all the paperwork straight. We discussed the advertising agreement and web policies. We went over model releases, property releases, hold harmless releases, and *God I want to see that picture of you on the verge of rel—focus, Jordan*. I forced myself to concentrate on something that wasn't the gorgeous man sitting across from me and what he looked like right before he fucking came.

Tried to force myself, anyway. Those portfolios were like a damned Pandora's box. Now that they'd been opened, now that I'd seen everything they had to offer, I couldn't get them out of my mind. And now, so many questions, so many things they'd done on camera that I'd been curious about. But were they just posing for the pictures? Or were those slices of a life I secretly wanted to live?

Dante leaned back and turned to Ryan. "Angel, would you put a referral discount on the Steele-Dawson account?"

"On it."

"Do I get a discount if I refer someone?" I asked.

"Of course," Dante said. "Ten percent if a referral books a session."

"So what if I book a second shoot myself?" I said, chuckling. "Do I get a referral discount for myself?"

"No, but there are incentives for repeat customers." He tilted his head slightly. "Why? What else did you have in mind?"

My mouth went dry. What *had* I had in mind? The risqué images flashed through my memory. No, that wasn't what I'd been thinking. Was it?

An upward flick of Dante's eyebrow reminded me I hadn't yet spoken.

I cleared my throat and shifted.

Ryan stepped out of the other room. "I believe I was promised a chance to shoot baby horses."

Forcing a quiet laugh and silently thanking him for the save, I said, "Right, right, of course."

They glanced at each other, something unspoken passing between them.

Then Dante looked at me. “Well, just let us know when you’re ready for more.”

Ryan nodded. “We’re always game for repeat offenders.”

“Repeat *clients*, Angel.”

“That’s what I said.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “Yeah, *anyway*…” They glanced at each other again, and I wished to God I could read their minds. I wondered if Dante was irritated with Ryan for letting me see the second book of erotic photos. Then again, maybe he wasn’t. I doubted Ryan would show someone something like that if Dante wasn’t comfortable with it.

I chewed my lip. If they’d offered to let me see the photos, they obviously weren’t embarrassed by them. Question was, were the contents of that book something within the realm of acceptable conversation? Too personal, even if it was in a professional setting?

Curiosity was going to kill this cat yet, and before I could think twice, I blurted out, “I have a question for you.”

Dante made a “go ahead” gesture.

“The, um, pictures I saw earlier. The ones with you guys in them.” The heat in my cheeks didn’t help me get my tongue untied. I coughed to get the air moving again. “I’m curious. Is all of that…fake?”

He cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, were you just posing for the photos, or are you really…” I chewed my lip, searching for the words.

Leaning against his desk, Ryan inclined his head. *Oh God, just like he did in that photo, and, yes I* do *want some of that, Ryan.*

“Are we really into kink?” he asked.

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. “Right. That.”

Their eyes met briefly. Then Dante said to me, “It’s not just for show. What you saw? That’s us.”

I gulped. “Wow. Really?”

They exchanged another look. Ryan said, “Let’s put it this way: Dante is the only one who calls me ‘Angel’ who isn’t a submissive.”

Oh God. I gestured at them. “So, Dante’s not a sub, then?”

Dante shook his head. “We’re both Doms.”

I stared at them.

Ryan stepped forward from his desk and put a hand on Dante’s shoulder. “That’s why we have submissives like the guys you saw in the photos. Neither of us is a sub.”

“So, to answer your question, yes.” Dante slid his hand over the top of Ryan’s, lacing their fingers together. “What you saw in those pictures is real.”

“Some of it we’ve done for other people or just to be artistic,”

Ryan said. “But the guys you saw posing with us? They were our submissives at various times. Those photos were posed but definitely real.”

Including that orgasm. My heart pounded, my mind superimposing that bead of sweat onto Dante’s temple.

“You weren’t…offended, were you?” Dante asked.

“Oh, no, definitely not.” I wet my lips. “I was just curious. They’re…interesting.”

Another shared look. Another silent something passing between minds I’d have sold my soul to read.

Then Dante turned to me, his expression unreadable. “Have you ever considered modeling?”

I jumped like one of them had kicked me. “I…can’t say I have.”

“You should,” he said softly. “You’re extremely photogenic.”

Ryan nodded. “Between what we saw at your sister’s wedding and the shoot with your horses, definitely.”

Dante folded his hands on the desk. “If you’re interested, we could do some shots of you by yourself. See if you like it.” He gestured at the door leading into the rest of the studio. “Your call.”

“You mean…” I gulped. “Right *now*?”

Dante smiled. “Why not?”

“Jump in with both feet,” Ryan said. “Don’t give yourself time to get nervous.”

“If it’s not your thing,” Dante said, “we don’t have to continue, and you don’t have to do it again. We’re not charging you for it. It’s just…”

“For fun,” Ryan said.

I shifted my gaze from Ryan to Dante and back again. Jump in with both feet. Don’t give myself time to get nervous. Don’t have to continue.

I moistened my lips, then shrugged. “Hell, why not?”

They didn’t waste any time. Dante and I stood, and I followed them into the studio. It reminded me of a movie set. Tripods, lights on stands, more lights hanging from the ceiling, cords and cables taped to the floor. Around the edges of the room, dozens of meticulously labeled boxes and crates lined the walls. At the center of the whole thing was a huge, mottled grey drape hanging from a rail and covering several square feet of the floor. A muslin, I think I’d heard someone call such a thing.

Don’t give myself time to get nervous. Right.

All I’d needed to get nervous was the time it took for Dante to ask if I’d ever considered modeling. Oh, yeah, I was nervous. But I was also intrigued, both with this idea and with them, so I forced the nerves back.

"So, what exactly do I do?"

Ryan adjusted a light. "Whatever we tell you to do."

"And you can say no to anything," Dante said.

That eased my nerves a little. They were in charge. All I had to do was listen to them, and there was a way out. I could leave now if I wanted to.

Dante disappeared into the shadows, then returned with an adjustable stool that had a single armrest on one side. He put it in the middle of the muslin.

"We'll have you start on that," he said. "It's usually a little easier to relax when you're sitting versus standing in the middle of a bare set."

Relax. Sure. I'll get right *on that.*

He gestured at it and smiled. "Have a seat."

And we're off.

I took a seat on the stool, resting my arm on the armrest. With the various bright lights around me, I could barely make out Dante and Ryan's shadows. Still, I had no trouble keeping track of them as they moved around. Their footsteps and their dark-against-darker shapes made them easy enough to track, especially when the occasional glint of light on Dante's almost-white hair distinguished his silhouette from Ryan's, but they also kept talking to me.

"Could you put your shoulders back a little? Good, just like that."

"Raise your chin a bit, just—yes, perfect."

"Turn your body about five degrees to your left. Right there, good."

Being in the middle of the set was weird. Out in the open. Exposed. Only their voices gently guiding me through where to put my hand or how to tilt my head kept me distracted from that vulnerability.

Then Ryan came out of the shadows and gestured for me to stand. "I think that's enough with the chair." He took it off the set, and Dante emerged from the darkness.

"Stand with one hip toward the front. Like this." He stood as he'd indicated, his body facing one side of the set while he looked to the front. I mirrored him, and he nodded. "Good. Just rest your weight on your left foot." When I did, he nodded again, and a moment later, he and Ryan were back behind the curtain of shadows.

He was right: without the company of a piece of furniture, I was definitely out in the open. Vulnerable, exposed, and not nearly as unnerved as I thought I'd be.

Nothing in the room was loud, but it was anything but quiet. The pop of the flash and the zing when it recycled. The snap of the shutter. My heartbeat. My own slow, uneven breathing.

Snap. Pop. Zing. Heartbeat. Heartbeat. Heartbeat. Snap. Snap. Snap. Pop. Zing.

"Hook your thumbs in your pockets," Ryan said. "Just let your arms relax." I did, wondering if he realized how far out of my vocabulary "relax" was at this point.

"Bring your left shoulder forward a little," Dante said. "Good, perfect."

Snap. Pop. Zing.

It should have been overwhelming taking commands from two people at once, but strangely enough, it wasn't. They didn't contradict each other. When one gave a suggestion, the other ran with it.

"Tilt your—" Dante stepped across the edge of the muslin. He pursed his lips, then reached for my shoulder but stopped before touching me. "May I?"

In spite of my nerves, I nodded.

Even through my shirt, the gentle contact of his fingers sent electricity down my spine. He nudged my shoulder back a little.

"Good, right there." He offered a smile, which did nothing to help me keep my balance. "Don't move."

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

They kept shooting for a few minutes, offering gentle suggestions. I focused completely on their voices, letting their directions ground me. I was aware of what they told me to do, aware of whether or not I was comfortable doing it, but my body simply…did.

"Squat down and rest your elbows on your knees. Just let your hands fall between, completely relaxed."

"Turn to the left."

"Tuck your chin just slightly."

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

"Stand and put your weight on your right heel."

"Don't move your head, but look up."

"Bring your chin toward your left shoulder and look straight ahead."

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

Blood pounded in my ears when Ryan came up to me as Dante had done a few minutes before. And just as Dante had done, he reached for me but stopped before making contact.

"May I?" he asked, fingertips inches from my face.

I'd forgotten how to speak, so I just nodded.

He touched my face, and I closed my eyes as that warm contact pulled all the air out of my lungs. With the gentlest pressure on my jaw, he turned my head *just* a little to the right.

"You okay?" His voice was soft, and his fingers still cupped my jaw.

"Yeah." I opened my eyes.

Snap. Pop. Zing.

Ryan grimaced and blinked a few times, evidently caught off guard by Dante's flash. Then he gave me a reassuring smile, and slipped back into the dark foreground.

I continued obeying their instructions, pretending I wasn't acutely aware of the phantom warmth where Ryan had touched my skin.

After a while, Dante said, "Would you be comfortable losing your shirt?"

I took a breath. Was I? Oh, hell yes I was.

"Jordan?" Ryan said.

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I can do that." I started unbuttoning my shirt, ignoring all the fluttering in my stomach and the tingling at the base of my spine.

"Wait," Ryan said.

My hands froze, and I looked up, eyebrows raised.

"Slower," he said.

I moistened my lips, then continued unbuttoning my shirt, forcing my unsteady hands to work slowly.

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

"Good, just like that," Ryan said softly. His approval sent a rush of…of something through my veins.

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

"Take your shirt all the way off." Dante appeared on the set, hand outstretched.

I obeyed, shrugging off my shirt. Warm air met my skin, making me acutely aware of every inch I made visible to them. Of the fact that I no longer had my shirt to mask the front of my jeans and the effect they had on me.

Dante took my shirt but paused before returning to his place. "Tell us if you get cold, okay?"

I nodded. The lights warmed my skin anyway, but it was the heat from under my skin that was liable to make me break into a sweat. Getting cold wasn't an issue.

Snap. Pop. Zing. Heartbeat. Heartbeat. Heartbeat. Snap. Snap. Snap. Pop. Zing.

Fuck, I was half naked. Taking orders, following simple commands that were commands nonetheless. My every move was under the scrutiny of the cameras, illuminated by lights and flashes, and in full unflinching view of *them*. Dante and Ryan. Dante. Ryan. Dante, who'd made me trip over my own feet at the wedding with nothing more than eye contact. Ryan, whose subs called him Angel. Dante, who'd been *right* there; Ryan, who'd silently asked if I wanted some of this, and I did, I did, God damn it, I did.

I was dreaming. I had to be.

"Take off your belt." Dante's command was terse, bordering on sharp, and didn't invite argument. Intellectually, I knew I was free to say no, and I was free to leave if I didn't want to do this. Not that it mattered. I wanted to.

My shaking hands amplified the jingling of my belt buckle, and the metallic sound echoed in the stillness while Dante and Ryan watched. Waited.

Snap. Pop. Zing. Snap. Pop. Zing.

I imagined them zooming in for close-ups of my hands, and wondered if the camera would pick up how much my hands trembled while I tried to work the simple buckle. I wondered just how visible my hard-on was to the cameras—to them—because I sure as hell couldn't miss it. I couldn't decide if that was mortifying or exhilarating.

Then came Ryan's voice, and with four words, he tilted the scales in favor of the latter:

"Get on your knees."

I obeyed immediately. My movement was slow, but it wasn't due to any hesitation. Caution, if anything. My jeans were just a little too tight to make moving, let alone kneeling, easy when I was this hard.

Ryan came toward me, appearing from the shadows as he'd done a few times already. Every step echoed in the silence. I kept my eyes down, watching the shrinking distance between us.

He stopped. Less than a foot separated his shoes from my knees. When he ran his fingers through my hair, I shivered.

"Look at me, Jordan."

I took a deep breath and slowly raised my eyes—*oh, holy fuck, he's as hard as I am*—until I met his.

"There's one more thing I want you to do," he said, almost whispering.

I licked my dry lips. "And that is?"

"I want you to call me Angel."

Chapter Eight

Angel

My words hung in the air.

Jordan stared up at me, lips parted, eyes wide with disbelief. Though I did everything I could not to show it, nerves had my gut tied into knots. The three of us had done this little dance, testing the waters and feeling each other out, giving lines for the others to read between. Now it was out there, on the table, with no mistaking Dante's and my intentions. Someone had to make the move and cross the line, so I had. First with the strategically placed portfolio, now with this.

Where we went from here, if anywhere, was up to Jordan.

Is this what you want?

Have we been reading you right all along?

Are you as submissive as your body language says you are?

Please. Please. Please.

Jordan ran the tip of his tongue across the inside of his lower lip. He took a breath. Then, whispering so softly I barely heard him at all, he simply said, "Angel."

Relief and arousal sizzled through my veins. I smiled, running my fingers through his hair again. Before I could speak again or even think far enough ahead to decide on my next move, Jordan put his hand on my hip. The heat of his touch through the thick denim made me shiver.

I'd wanted this, I'd hoped for it, but I'd been damned sure it wouldn't actually happen. And now…was it?

He brought his other hand up, stopping just inches from my belt buckle. Unsteady hand hovering dangerously close to my very erect cock, he looked up at me and whispered, "May I?"

Yes, oh, good God, yes. Keeping my expression as neutral as I could, I nodded.

When he slid his hand over the front of my jeans, I fought to keep it together, something that was *never* a struggle for me. But there was no way in hell this was real. This wasn't really happening. Jordan Steele wasn't really kneeling at my feet with my nickname on his lips. He wasn't really unbuckling my belt, drawing my zipper down and—oh Jesus, yes, he really *was* stroking my cock like that.

His eyes met mine again. With an upward flick of his eyebrows, he asked. With a slow nod, I answered.

And with a kind of barely contained enthusiasm that made me weak in the knees, he sucked my cock. He steadied us both with the hand on my hip, stroked me with the other, and did things with his

tongue that…that…

"*Fuck*, that's good," I breathed, gently stroking his hair because I needed to touch him just to anchor myself. "That's fucking amazing, Jordan…" If he was this talented with his mouth, I could only imagine what kind of kisser he was, and that thought turned me on even more.

I turned my head, and Dante met my eyes from where he watched a few feet away. His Adam's apple bobbed, and he licked his lips in the same instant Jordan swept his tongue around the head of my cock. I shuddered, sucking in a breath, and Dante grinned.

I focused on Jordan again. His eyes flicked up and met mine for a fleeting second, and if that didn't make my knees shake enough, he took care of the rest of my balance by adding a subtle twist with his hand. I moved one foot over a few inches, just to stabilize myself.

"Dante, his mouth is fucking incredible," I slurred.

"Is it?"

"Uh-huh." My fingers trembled in Jordan's hair. "My God…"

Jordan doubled his efforts, and my eyes rolled back. It wasn't usually this easy to make me come orally, but if he kept doing that…

"That's right, Jordan," I whispered, moving my hips with him, fucking his mouth while he desperately, hungrily took it. "Just like that."

Dante's hands on my sides startled me. He slid his arms around me, kissing the side of my neck. Fucking hell, Jordan's hand and mouth on my cock…and Dante's lips and stubble and warm breath on my neck…and Jordan's hand…Dante's lips…Jordan's mouth…Dante whispering something…Jordan's goddamned tongue…

"Holy *fuck*." My knees buckled. Had Dante not been behind me, I'd have collapsed, but he kept me on my feet, kept murmuring in my ear, and Jordan didn't miss a beat, just kept right on stroking, sucking, and making sure I came and came and fucking came.

When I found my voice, I whispered for Jordan to stop, and he immediately obeyed, stopping so abruptly, my heart skipped. I didn't move. Didn't breathe. Eventually, Dante let me go so I could stand on my own two feet. One last shiver worked its way down my spine, and reality slowly set in. We'd really done this. Jordan was—willingly, eagerly—on his knees in front of me, in my studio, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand after he'd made me come. After he'd damn near driven me to my knees with a blowjob. Holy shit.

He looked up at me through his lashes, and the disbelief was mutual. For a moment, we just stared at each other, trying to catch our breath. Then his face colored a little, and he shifted his gaze down.

"You okay?" I asked, still trying to catch my breath.

He nodded. “I’ve just…I’ve been wanting to do that for a while now.”

I fucking knew it. I smiled. “Which part?”

He glanced down at his knees, then licked his lips and met my eyes again. “All of it.”

“You’re not the only one,” I said.

While I straightened my clothes, Dante knelt behind Jordan. He put his hands on Jordan’s shoulders and leaned in to kiss the side of his neck. He whispered something I couldn’t hear, but the response was a shiver and a ragged release of breath. Then Jordan leaned back a little and turned his head so they could see each other.

Dante trailed his fingertips down Jordan’s cheek. “I think,” he whispered, “that we’re going to have a *lot* of fun with you.” Sliding his hand around to the back of Jordan’s neck, Dante kissed him. Jordan turned a little more and put his hand on Dante’s face. I licked my lips, wondering how much it turned Dante on that his first taste of Jordan tasted like me. If I knew him as well as I should after twelve years, my boyfriend was absolutely rock hard and desperate to fuck the living hell out of Jordan.

Soon, Dante, I thought, biting my lip as I watched the two of them kiss with feverish, breathless desperation. *You’ll get to fuck him soon*.

I hoped. Jordan could decide this was an impulsive mistake or just a one-afternoon stand. But I doubted it. Not with the way he’d obeyed without flinching and knelt without hesitating.

And not with the way, after they exchanged a few words I couldn’t hear, Dante stood, and Jordan, still on his knees, went for Dante’s belt.

Dante’s eyes met mine. I grinned. So did he.

Blood pounded in my ears as I watched Jordan unbuckle and unzip, and my mouth watered as Jordan sucked my boyfriend’s cock. Just as he’d done with me, he stroked with one hand, steadied himself with the other. If the movements of his jaw were any indication, along with Dante’s long, delirious whimper, Jordan was doing the same with his tongue that he’d done to me.

Dante bit his lip. His shoulders rose higher and fell lower with his deepening, quickening breaths. “Oh, Christ,” he moaned. “That’s…oh, my God, how do you *do* that?”

Jordan moved faster now, and Dante sucked in a breath. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. I always loved the way he looked when he neared the edge—brow furrowed, eyes screwed shut, lips pulled into a grimace—and now, knowing the magic Jordan worked with his mouth on Dante’s cock, it was all I could do not to grab the camera and capture that beautiful intensity on my lover’s face. But that would likely be a bit much for Jordan, so I let the

camera be. No matter. What I saw was burned into my mind.

Dante cursed. Exhaled. Groaned. Then his lips parted, his eyes flew open, and a violent tremor forced a breath out of him.

"Oh fuck," he murmured. "Oh fuck, fuck, don't…oh God…" He shuddered a few times, then closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

Jordan sat back on his heels, licking his lips and trying to catch his breath. I put my arm around Dante's waist, partly to touch him and partly to make sure his legs didn't collapse under him. When he looked at me with that familiar, insatiable hunger in his eyes, I pulled him to me and kissed him. He was breathless from his orgasm, and his mouth was faintly salty from mine.

Then he broke the kiss and shifted his gaze down toward Jordan. Still trying to catch his own breath, he whispered, "I don't know where the fuck you learned to do that with your mouth…" He trailed off, shaking his head.

Jordan smiled. "I aim to please."

"Well, you're getting two glowing reviews from us." I offered him a hand. He clasped my forearm, and I helped him to his feet, but he winced, faltering slightly before he was all the way up.

"You all right?" I asked.

He nodded, cheeks coloring a little. "Just spent a little too much time on my knees, I think."

I chuckled. "Kneeling on a hard floor will do that to you."

"Oh, I think I can handle it," he said.

"Good," Dante growled. He cupped both sides of Jordan's neck and moved in for a kiss. They didn't screw around with a light, gentle kiss this time; from the second their lips met, it was desperate, hungry and breathless. I couldn't decide who was more likely to either collapse or drag the other to the floor. When they broke that kiss, Dante rested his forehead against Jordan's, and they panted against each other's lips.

Jordan took a breath. "And you say I'm good with—" A gasp cut him off abruptly, and his spine straightened.

I realized after a second that Dante had slid a hand between them. He squeezed the front of Jordan's jeans, and the devilish look he shot me told me that oh, yeah, the gods had been kind to this man.

He turned his attention back to Jordan. As he unbuckled Jordan's belt, Dante whispered, "Didn't you think we'd return the favor?"

Jordan exhaled hard, then gasped again. "I…didn't… I…"

"Shh." Dante kissed him lightly, starting on Jordan's zipper. "Unless you want me to stop?"

"No, don't stop," Jordan said quickly. "Please."

"Didn't think so."

A shudder ran up Jordan's spine, and he closed his eyes, moaning as Dante stroked his cock.

"After what you just did for both of us," Dante said, pausing to let his lip brush Jordan's, "I'd say this is the very, very least we can do."

"We are gentlemen, after all." I stood behind Jordan and put my hands on his shoulders. Kissing the side of his neck, I gently drew him back so he could lean against me. "Sort of."

"Close enough to gentlemen, anyway," Dante said, "not to let you out of here without an orgasm or two."

Jordan bit his lip. "Don't let me stop you."

"You like what he's doing to you?" I murmured.

He moaned something.

"Answer me, Jordan," I whispered in his ear. "I want to know, do you like what he's doing to you?"

"Yes." It came out as little more than a soft breath. "Yes, I…oh, God…"

Dante stroked faster, his shoulder rising and falling in time with his hand, and Jordan's back arched off me. His head fell back, and when I kissed his neck, his pulse raced against my lips. My own pulse soared as he groaned, almost whimpered. A tremor almost knocked him off-balance, and he grabbed Dante's other arm for stability.

I nuzzled Jordan's neck, making sure my five o'clock shadow grazed his skin just before my lips did. When he exhaled and shuddered, I whispered, "Don't hold back, Jordan." I kissed his neck again. "Let us feel you come." Another kiss. "And see you come." Another kiss, this time keeping my lips on his skin when I added, "Let us *hear* you come."

He pulled in a sharp breath. His entire body tensed, and when that tension broke with a long, helpless moan, goose bumps prickled the back of my neck and down my spine. I closed my eyes, imagining what it would be like to be deep inside him when he came like that, and the next shudder was mine.

"Jesus Christ, that's hot," Dante whispered. "Just like I knew it would be."

I opened my eyes and met Dante's over Jordan's shoulder. Then he leaned in and kissed Jordan, so I kissed Jordan's neck. He melted between us, gripping Dante's shoulders for support while his legs shook beneath him.

I backed off first. Then Dante broke the kiss, and we let Jordan catch his breath and regain his balance. While Dante left to clean off his arm in the bathroom, Jordan faced me.

"Wasn't what you expected when you came in tonight, was it?" I asked.

He laughed. "Not what I expected, no."

“Well, I do hope you were as pleasantly surprised as we were.” I slid my hand around to the back of his neck and teased his lips apart with the tip of my tongue. When he granted me access, the saltiness of his mouth almost drew a moan out of me. That, and just as I’d suspected, his oral prowess included being a spine-tingling kisser. Even while he let me take the lead, he knew just how to drag his lower lip across mine and tantalize my tongue with the tip of his. His mouth must have been made specifically for all things sexual.

When I broke the kiss, his gaze and shoulders both dropped. I ran the backs of my fingers along his jaw, encouraging him to lift his chin. When our eyes met, I whispered, “You’ve never done something like this before, have you?”

“Well, I *have* sucked cock a few times,” he said.

“Believe me, I can tell. What I meant,” I whispered, pretending I wasn’t still tongue-tied from his kiss, “was have you ever played the submissive before?”

He shook his head.

“Is it something you’d want to keep doing?” I asked.

He gave a quiet laugh. “Are you kidding?”

I smiled, then inclined my head slightly. “I’m serious. We’ve been looking for a compatible submissive for a long, long time, and if you’re willing…” I let my raised eyebrows finish the question.

Jordan gulped and dropped his gaze. I didn’t push for an answer, just let him quietly process what I’d suggested. Seconds ticked by. I was about to tell him he didn’t have to come up with an answer now, that he’d be wise to sleep on it and give it some thought, but our eyes met again. The intense determination in his kept me silent.

He took a breath. “I want that more than you can possibly imagine.”

Chapter Nine

Dante

Angel and I didn't talk much on the way over to Jordan's the next night. My stomach was wound up in knots, and I recognized the rapid-fire thumb-tapping on the steering wheel as an unmistakable tell of nerves on his part. I slid my hand over his thigh, and his thumbs slowed but not by much. Even when he put his hand on top of mine, his fingers twitched with the urge to tap.

I suspected he had the same concerns I did. Had we pushed Jordan too fast? Gone too quickly from strangers to something more, especially for someone as new to this as he was? We had gone fast, that much was for sure, but was it too much? Now, he'd had a full night and the better part of a day to have second thoughts. If he had them, I hoped he spoke them, but I also hoped we hadn't scared him off by coming on too strong.

Not that we'd had a hell of a lot of choice, I supposed. We had to make a move, because if he walked out of the studio last night, that would have been the end of it unless he came back. I hadn't been too sure of Angel's strategy with the erotic albums, but they'd found their mark, and though Jordan had been nervous as he progressed from looking at photos to sucking us off in the studio, he hadn't objected.

So now we just needed to sort out what had happened in the heat of the moment and what we all really wanted. Meeting at his place gave Jordan the home-field advantage. We'd be in his territory; he'd be in his own comfortable surroundings.

To some, it might have seemed a bit businesslike, sitting down like this to talk things over, but it was a necessary evil. We barely knew the guy. The chemistry was there, we'd all clicked like nobody's business, but we were still getting to know each other. That, and he'd never been with a Dom, let alone two. Rules and limitations needed to be established before this went any further, *if* it went any further.

Whether or not it did was completely up to Jordan. I just hoped we hadn't fucked this up.

Angel turned down Jordan's long driveway. Gravel crunched under the tires as we drove between the two rows of white fences toward the house that overlooked the rest of the sprawling farm. Blanketed horses dotted the grass-covered landscape, grazing in the warm light of the setting sun. It all resembled a panoramic image from a glossy coffee-table book, not a place where three men would convene to negotiate cuffs and safe words. Then again, most places where such things occurred were unassuming from the outside. Still, this was surreal. Probably because every component of this living

photograph—the house, the horses, the fences, the barn—belonged to Jordan Steele.

Angel pulled up in front of the three-car garage and parked. We got out and started up the walk, and it was then that he glanced at me and spoke for the first time in I didn't know how long.

"Think he'll still want to do this?"

"I certainly hope so." I put my hand in his, and we ascended the steps to the front porch.

"One way to find out, I guess." He rang the doorbell, and we waited.

Beyond the door, muffled footsteps padded across a hard floor, and through the frosted glass, Jordan's blurred shape came into view. He opened the door, and his smile loosened some of the knots in my gut. He still seemed a little nervous, making and breaking eye contact with us while we took our shoes off, but there was no ice, no hostility.

"Sasha's in his kennel tonight," he said, "so he shouldn't bother us." His eyes darted toward me.

I realized then that I'd been so wound up about this conversation, I hadn't even thought about the dog. I swallowed. "Cool, thanks. I hope it's not too much trouble."

Jordan gestured dismissively and shook his head. "Not at all. This is his downtime anyway." He led us into the kitchen. "Can I get either of you—"

Heavy footsteps at the other end of the hall turned our heads.

Jordan released a long breath through his nose. "Fuck," he muttered.

Naturally, the asshole he lived with had to pick that moment to make an appearance.

"Someone at the door?" he called from out of sight. "I thought I heard the doorbell." He stepped into the kitchen, and scowled when our presence answered his question.

"You remember Dante and An—Ryan, don't you?" Jordan sounded like he spoke through clenched teeth.

"Oh, yeah, I remember." Eli eyed Angel, then held his hand palm up. "Would it help you recognize me if I had a tray of hors d'oeuvres?"

Angel smiled sweetly. "Oh, no, you're committed to memory now."

Jordan and I both struggled to suppress our amusement. Eli muttered something, then went to the fridge to get himself a beer.

Jordan ignored him and turned to us. "Drinks, anyone?"

"I'll take a Coke," I said.

Jordan nodded. "Angel?"

"Coke's fine."

Eli sipped his beer but furrowed his brow at us. “Angel? I thought your name was Ryan.”

Jordan’s cheeks reddened and he bit his lip, but Angel didn’t miss a beat. “Some people call me Ryan, some people call me Angel.”

“Where’d the name come from?” Eli raised an eyebrow. “I mean, is it supposed to be ironic somehow?”

Angel shrugged. “There are all kinds of angels, so interpret it how you will.”

“So what kind of ‘angel’ are you?” The patronizing sarcasm in Eli’s voice normally would have set my teeth on edge, and it certainly made Jordan fidget, but Eli knew not with whom he trifled.

Your funeral, sunshine.

“Well,” Angel said, probably struggling to resist the temptation to polish his nails on the lapel of his shirt, “I’m sure as shit not the Angel of Mercy.”

“Angel of Death?” I suggested.

He shook his head. “I prefer Angel of Darkness. ‘Death’ is a little dark, you know?”

“And ‘dark’ isn’t?”

“Good point. Angel of Pain?”

“The Paingel?”

“Ooh.” His eyes widened and he stroked his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I like that.”

Jordan snickered, shaking his head while he handed around cans of Coke. Eli just seemed irritated, which amused me. Rolling his eyes, he took a drink. Then, apparently thinking he had any chance of getting anything but a snide answer out of my darling Angel of Sarcasm, he spoke again.

“So should I call you Ryan or Angel?”

“Depends.” Angel looked him right in the eye. “You willing to get on your knees and suck my cock for the right to call me Angel?”

Jordan laughed behind his Coke can. I pressed my lips together but failed miserably at keeping a straight face. God bless Angel and his ability to deadpan damn near anything.

Eli wrinkled his nose. “I think I’ll pass.”

Popping the tab on his soda, Angel shrugged. “Ryan it is, then.”

I could almost hear Eli’s teeth grinding. He took a breath and squared his shoulders. To Jordan, he said, “Well, I’m out of here for the evening. Have fun tonight.”

Jordan raised his can and gave a sweet, innocent grin that must have done Angel proud. “Oh, we will, don’t you worry.”

Thankfully, I wasn’t taking a drink just then. Angel, however, wasn’t so lucky. He turned away, coughing and sputtering while Eli shot us all indignant looks. With one last eye roll and a few mumbled

curses, Eli left.

I put my hand on Angel's shoulder. "You okay?"

Still coughing, he nodded and gave a thumbs-up. His throat probably wasn't yet clear enough to speak, but I was satisfied he wouldn't choke to death, so I turned back to Jordan and my own drink.

"Sorry about him." Jordan shook his head, his cheeks still a little flush with what I guessed to be a mix of embarrassment and irritation. "My animals have better manners than he does."

"It's okay." I nodded at Angel. "This one obviously keeps him in line. Even if he can be a dick about it."

Angel glared at me, still coughing.

"Oh, Eli will get over it," Jordan said.

"Good." I paused. "So, I guess we should get down to what we came to talk about."

Jordan shifted his weight. "Yeah, I suppose we should." He chewed his lip and, with some effort, met my eyes. "Listen, I've never done this before. The Dom/sub thing, being with more than one person, any of it."

"But is it something you want to do?" I asked.

Angel turned around, clearing his throat once more. "If it's not, just say no. You won't hurt our feelings."

"It's not that." Jordan rubbed the back of his neck and dropped his gaze. "Not even close. It's just…new." He stared with unfocused eyes at the floor between us. Then he took a breath. "I'm not even sure what we'd be doing."

"Well, that's why we're here." Angel's voice was low and gentle. "To make sure we all know what we're doing and we're all on the same page."

Jordan nodded. "I guess I'm following your lead, then."

I smiled. "That's why you're the sub."

He laughed quietly. "Good point."

"Though you'll actually be the one in control," Angel said.

Jordan leaned against the counter and drummed his fingers on the edge. "True, I guess I will."

"So, how much do you know about BDSM?" I asked.

"Some," he said. "I've never tried it, but I've done a lot of reading. On the Internet, that sort of thing."

"So if I mention safe words, hard limits, scenes, power exchanges, that kind of thing," Angel said, "you know what I mean?"

Jordan nodded.

"But you've never tried any of it?" I asked.

"I've been interested in BDSM for the last two years." Jordan pointed down the hall where Eli had gone. "I've been with him for

three. Do the math."

I grimaced. "Point taken."

"But you still read about it?" Angel's fingernail clicked rapidly against the side of his Coke can. "Did you plan on getting involved in it with him?"

Jordan shook his head. "No, I was just curious. That, and it was something to read about when I was up late, because I was avoiding going to bed."

Angel blinked. The tapping stopped. "You mean you stayed up reading about the kind of sex you weren't having to avoid going to bed with the guy you were with?"

Jordan's cheeks colored a little, and he shrugged. "It was more fun to read about sex with people who actually cared what the other person got out of it than to have the other kind."

"Ouch," I said.

"Tell me about it."

"Still," Angel said, "that must have frustrated the hell out of you."

"What can I say?" Jordan shrugged. "I like torturing myself."

"A masochist." A grin spread across Angel's lips. "Excellent."

"You're a sadist, then?"

I laughed. "Oh God, you have *no* idea."

The devilishness in Jordan's grin almost put Angel's to shame. "Good."

Jesus. He really is one of us. Be still, my beating heart. You too, cock.

Jordan went on. "Okay, so, I get BDSM. Inexperienced as all hell, but I think I sort of know what I'm getting into there." He shifted his weight. "The one thing I'm a bit confused about is how this would work. With the three of us. How does this kind of relationship work? I mean, for lack of a better word."

"No, it's the right word," I said. "It's a relationship of sorts, just not a very traditional one." I gestured at Angel. "Particularly with the number of people involved."

"That, and it doesn't have to be a twenty-four/seven thing," Angel said. "This can be the kind of thing where we get together once in a while and play."

"Or it can be a regular thing," I said. "We've had subs we saw every few months or so, and we've had some we saw several times a week."

"It's just sex, though, right?" Jordan asked. "Not a 'relationship' in the traditional sense?"

"It's…" Angel paused, chewing the inside of his cheek and absently brushing a few strands of hair out of his eyes. Then, with a sharp intake of breath, he came back to life. "It's a little more complicated than 'just sex' or 'friends with benefits' or anything like

that. What we're doing isn't going to be as casual as a one-night stand, but it won't be intimate in the same way a relationship is."

"It's not as detached as casual sex," I said. "It can't be, not with the level of trust it requires."

Jordan raised an eyebrow, his eyes flicking back and forth between us. Angel and I exchanged a brief look.

Angel tapped his nail on the side of his Coke can again. "If you're concerned about being the third wheel or the odd man out, don't be. The way we see it, our romantic relationship is its own entity, and this three-way relationship is another."

"What we have as a couple is our own thing," I said. "As a trio, a triple, a triangle, whatever the fuck you want to call this"—I gestured at the three of us—"everyone is an equal player."

Jordan nodded. "Okay, I guess that makes sense."

"Are you comfortable with the idea of playing with one of us at a time in addition to all three of us being together?" I asked.

The corner of Jordan's lips curled slightly. "Oh, I don't know if I can handle only one of you."

Angel winked. "Didn't think you'd mind."

"It's perfectly okay with us," I said. "And of course you're not committed to only us. Though it's only good manners to let us know if you're going to have an all-bareback orgy with a dozen strangers."

"No kidding," Angel said. "That way we can go too."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

Jordan chuckled. "Yeah, you did."

"*Anyway*." I glared at each of them in turn. "This isn't an exclusive arrangement, let's put it that way."

"And speaking of handling one of us at a time," Angel said. "Since you're not used to being topped, we'll start out with just one of us. Ease into being a submissive to one of us, then the other, then both."

"Where would the other be?" Jordan asked.

I shrugged. "Depends on what everyone's comfortable with. In the same room, in another room, whatever."

Angel looked at Jordan. "I assume you're okay with being watched?"

"Nope. Can't stand it. Everybody turn away." He paused. "Especially if I'm sucking someone off in a photography studio."

Angel and I exchanged glances, both lifting our eyebrows, then looked back at him.

"Why do I get the feeling we're going to have our hands full with you?" Angel asked.

"Maybe I need two Doms instead of one." Jordan kept a straight face about as well as Angel could. "You know, to keep me in line."

"There's probably some truth to that," I said, trying to sound stern.

Angel chuckled, then turned serious again. "So let's talk limits. The big one for me relates to anal sex. I never receive, only give."

Jordan nodded. "Makes sense, given that you're a Dom."

"No, it's not that. I just don't like it." Angel gestured at me. "Dante loves it, though."

"Even from a sub?" Jordan asked.

"Of course." I grinned. "Just don't think for a second that if you're fucking me, you're in control."

His eyes widened slightly, and the twitch of his shoulders suggested he was trying to mask a shiver.

"Any particular limits for you?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "I'm still not a hundred percent sure how I'll deal with pain or bondage, so…"

"Don't worry about that part now," Angel said. "We'll get to that. Stick to the basics for now. Just us giving you simple commands, steadily taking things further than we did last night until you're ready to play with some fire." I thought the choice of words coupled with that knowing, scheming look would unnerve Jordan, but he held Angel's gaze and swept the tip of his tongue along the inside of his lower lip.

"Anything you absolutely don't like?" I asked. "Being touched any particular place or way? Anything sexual?"

Jordan fidgeted. "I really don't like my feet messed with. At all. Foot massages, tickling, anything."

Angel and I both nodded.

"Is that a boundary you'd want us to push at some point?" Angel asked. "Or just leave it alone?"

"I might change my mind later," Jordan said. "But for now, leave it alone."

"Noted," I said. "Anything else?"

"You're not opposed to sucking cock, are you?" Angel deadpanned.

"I can be blackmailed into it if you have any incriminating photos of me," Jordan shot back.

Angel and I looked at each other. *Oh, yes, we are going to have so much fun with you, Jordan*.

"Okay, smartass," I said. "Another thing: this doesn't extend beyond the bedroom. We're bedroom Doms, not full-time Doms."

"In the bedroom, you submit to us," Angel said. "Outside it, we're just three guys. So you can be mouthy and sarcastic out here—"

"Oh, great, just encourage him." I rolled my eyes.

"Trust me," Jordan said. "I don't *need* any encouragement."

"Didn't think you did," I said. "Any questions?"

He furrowed his brow. "I assume condoms are obvious?"

"Absolutely," I said. "And we use them on our own too."

"You do?" Jordan asked. "Even after all this time?"

"Yes, especially since we're not completely monogamous, and…" I put a hand on Angel's shoulder. "Just a personal preference, I guess."

"Works for me," Jordan said.

"And for safe words," Angel said. "We use 'red' and 'yellow'. Pretty basic."

"I'm familiar with how they work," Jordan said. "Red to stop, yellow to slow down."

"Good," Angel said with a nod. "And don't ever be afraid to use them. Ever."

"You'll never be punished for using a safe word," I said. "Understood?"

Something unwound in Jordan's posture. "Understood."

"It'll probably be a while before we start pushing you hard enough to warrant a safe word," Angel said.

"Starting out, it's mostly a matter of us earning your trust," I said. "Which means we figure out where you're comfortable, where *we're* comfortable, and go from there."

Angel set his Coke can down. "So basically, do you trust us enough to let us fuck you?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose again and released an exasperated sigh. Then I gestured sharply and said to Angel, "You know, one of these days, I swear to God, I *will* teach you a thing or two about subtlety."

He shrugged. "What? It was a valid question."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, so is 'do you want to suck my cock?', but __"

"I do, by the way," Jordan said, completely matter-of-factly and with a perfectly straight face. "Just so we're clear."

I blinked. Stared at him. At Angel. Back at Jordan. "Christ, you two really are cut from the same cloth, aren't you?"

"See?" Angel clapped my shoulder. "Subtlety is *so* overrated."

I shot him a playful glare, and he batted his eyes. Chuckling, I turned back to Jordan. "Any other concerns, limits, whatever?"

"Not offhand," he said. "I'm not quite sure what we're doing…um, whenever we…do this. Like, how far you guys are going to push things right away."

"Not very far." I set my drink down and started toward him. "Are you ready to do anything tonight?"

He took a breath. "Yeah, yeah, definitely."

"Good." I put my hand on his waist. He drew in a sharp breath but

kept his eyes locked on mine as I spoke. “So now we’ve broken the ice, and we’re all on the same page, but we’ll still take things slow.” I trailed my fingertips down the side of his face. “It’ll take time for us to fully earn your trust and submission, but once we do…” I leaned in until our lips were nearly touching. “…something tells me you’ll enjoy it.”

“I have no doubt at all,” he murmured and melted against me when I kissed him. When I let him go, he met my eyes, then dropped his gaze and took a deep breath. After a moment, he looked at me through his lashes. “Unless there’s anything else we need to work out, should we take this someplace other than the kitchen?” He swallowed hard. “The bedroom, maybe?”

I stroked his hair and kissed him again, gentler this time. “I like the way you think. Lead the way.”

Angel and I followed Jordan out of the kitchen. The stairs creaked beneath our feet as we climbed to the third floor. At the top of the steps were three doors, and Jordan reached for the center one. The slightest tremor in his hand gave me pause, and with a hand on his arm, I stopped him before he opened the door.

“Are you absolutely sure you’re comfortable with this?” I asked, keeping my voice as gentle as possible.

“Yes,” he said softly.

I looked down at his hand, then met his eyes again. He followed the same track my gaze had taken and pursed his lips.

Angel put his hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “If you’re not, just say so.”

Jordan swallowed. He glanced at Angel, then at me. “No, I want to do this. Just…a little nervous.”

“That’s to be expected.” Angel kissed the side of Jordan’s neck, and Jordan shivered. Almost whispering, Angel said, “It’s okay if you’re nervous. Most people would be, especially with two strangers.”

I drew gentle arcs on Jordan’s wrist with my thumb. “We’re more than willing to do this, but if you’re not ready, just say so.”

A cautious but unmistakable grin pulled at Jordan’s lips. “If I wasn’t ready”—he pushed the door open—“we’d still be downstairs.”

Angel and I exchanged another fleeting moment of eye contact, then followed Jordan into the bedroom. The door clicked shut behind Angel, and I made note of the catch of Jordan’s breath. Definitely nervous.

There was a chair beside the window, so Angel sat. Jordan faced me. His eyebrows lifted in an unspoken, “What do you want me to do?”

I rested a hand on his waist and the other on the back of his neck. Adopting my sharp “Dom voice”, as Angel called it, I said, “Here’s

how this is going to work. You're going to get on your knees and suck my cock, but you're not going to make me come." I paused and couldn't help noticing the way his body relaxed a little at the sound of my voice. *God, you were born to be a sub, weren't you?* "And then I'm going to fuck you."

Jordan shivered.

I went on. "You can use a safe word at any time, or just tell me to stop. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Good." I said. "Oh, and there's one more thing."

His eyes widened, a mix of anticipation and uncertainty in his expression.

"As long as you're under his or my command," I said, "your orgasms belong to us. If you come when we haven't ordered or permitted you to, there will be consequences. Understood?"

He nodded.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," he said quickly. "Consequences. Right. Understood."

"Good," I said, a little softer now. "And you're still okay with this, right?"

"Ooh, yeah."

I kissed him gently, pressing my hips against his so he could feel that I was already hard. So was he. My God, so was he.

I broke the kiss and stepped back. He dropped his gaze and sucked his lower lip into his mouth for just one more taste. Without thinking about it, I did the same.

"Unbutton your shirt." I paused. "Slowly."

Jordan closed his eyes and swept his tongue across his lip. With hands as unsteady as his breathing, he reached for his top button. He kept his eyes down. I wasn't sure if he focused on his hands or just the floor, but he didn't look at either of us. Even after the last button was open, he simply dropped his hands to his sides and waited.

"Take it off." I extended my hand. "And give it to me."

He shrugged his shirt off his shoulders, pulled his hands free and handed it to me. Our eyes met briefly, but before he'd even released the shirt to my custody, he looked down again.

I put the shirt on the bed and took a few steps back, creating a broader expanse of space between us before I said, "Take off your belt."

The buckle jingled. Leather hissed over denim. Once it was off, his belt draped over his upturned palm like a serpentine offering, he met my eyes, silently asking what to do next. I nodded toward the floor. He flipped his hand over and let the belt fall with a *clink-thud*.

"Jeans off."

He chewed his lip and hesitated, but obeyed.

Before he'd even stepped out of them, I added, "Boxers too." Tension in his shoulders slowed his movements as he stripped out of his last remaining clothes. I was well aware how unnervingly vulnerable this made him. We were fully dressed; he was completely naked. Several feet of vacant air separated us from him, and being out in the open like that often amplified the sense of exposure.

I let a few seconds tick by, which must have been an eternity for him. When at last I spoke, I kept my voice gentle and soft to avoid startling him. "Excellent. Now get on your knees."

Jordan glanced at me, at Angel, at me again. Before I could ask once more if he was still okay with this, though, he took a deep breath and knelt.

I waited a few seconds, letting the empty stillness settle its weight on his beautiful, bare shoulders. Then I moved toward him, giving him time to get used to my nearness before I stopped right in front of him. He stared at the floor between us. His fingers twitched a little on his knees. Even if my proximity unnerved and intimidated him, it likely alleviated that sense of vulnerable exposure from being naked and out in the open.

Mirroring the first contact Angel had made in the studio, I ran my fingers through Jordan's hair. He jumped at first but then exhaled, his shoulders dropping slightly.

"Look at me, Jordan," I whispered.

Slowly, he raised his chin and met my eyes. Few things in this world were hotter than submission, and kneeling at my feet, looking up at me like that, Jordan was the very picture of it.

With one hand still in his hair, I went for my own belt. Jordan held my gaze and swallowed hard. When I drew my zipper down, he bit his lip. I half expected him to close his eyes or shift them away, but my eyes hadn't given his permission.

"When we started tonight," I said, stroking my cock a few inches from him, "what did I say you were going to do?"

He swallowed again, then cleared his throat. "Suck your cock." His eyes flicked toward it, then quickly back up to me. "And then you were going to fuck me."

I nodded. "Good. You know what to do, then."

He immediately leaned forward and wrapped his fingers around my cock, and though I was silently going insane at the mere thought of what I knew his mouth could do, I stopped him just before his lips would have touched me. I put my hand over his, forbidding him from stroking, and again held his hair with the other, keeping his mouth *just* out of reach of what he wanted.

"Wait."

I couldn't tell if the way his eyebrows lifted was out of panic, confusion, or a little of both.

"Do you—" My breath caught, all of my attention suddenly drawn to his hand on my cock, where a hint of a tremor made his fingers tighten-release-tighten-release. Subtle, yes, but in my maddening state of wanting him right now, it was almost enough to throw me off-balance. I gripped his hand a little tighter, which stilled the tremor, but meant he was squeezing my cock and *God fucking damn it, I've never had a sub throw me off like you do*.

"Dante?" Angel said. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm good." Recovering my composure, I looked down at Jordan. "Do you want to suck my cock?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"That didn't sound very enthusiastic."

Eyes locked on mine, he chewed his lip. "Yes, I want to."

"You want to what?"

"I want to suck your cock."

I raised an eyebrow. "I believe you mean you want permission to suck my cock, yes?"

He shivered. "Yes, that's what I meant."

"Then ask for it."

"Please—" He licked his lips. "Please, may I suck your cock?"

"Yes, you may." I released his hair.

My heart didn't even have time to beat before Jordan's mouth was around my cock. If I thought he was enthusiastic in the studio, that was nothing compared to now. Just a few seconds of denial, and hunger had become pure need. I thought he groaned but didn't feel the hum of his voice on my skin, and a second later, realized it had been me.

When my eyes could focus, I watched him, struggling just to breathe. I wondered if Jordan even possessed a gag reflex, so deep could he fuck me with his mouth. He deep-throated me until my breath caught. Teased the head of my cock with his lips and tongue until I shivered. Deep-throated again. His hand stroked, then steadied, then stroked. All the while, his eagerness didn't wane in the slightest. I could have let him do this all night long, and he probably would have.

But I wasn't done with him yet.

While he stroked and sucked me halfway to oblivion, I pulled off my shirt and tossed it in the general direction of his discarded clothing. Jordan glanced up at me, and though I didn't hear the sound he made, it reverberated across nerve endings that couldn't take much more.

Gently but firmly, I said, "Stop."

Without a second's hesitation, he did. He released me and rocked

back on his heels.

I wet my lips. “I want to fuck you.” As I stepped back and took off my jeans, I said, “Do you have lube?”

Jordan nodded. “Should I get it?”

Waiting for permission or a command. Good, Jordan. I smiled. “Yes.”

Angel pulled a condom out of his back pocket and tossed it to me while Jordan got the lube out of his bedside-table drawer. Of course Angel and I had brought lube. We always came prepared. But Jordan’s complete lack of hesitation when I’d brought it up signaled to me that he still wanted very much to continue. As if the enthusiastic magic he’d worked with his mouth hadn’t been a clue.

Jordan returned and handed me the lube. At my command, he went back to his knees at my feet, but a wince flickered across his face.

“How are your knees?” I asked.

“They’re fine.” A shy, almost cautious smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I think I can stay on them for a while yet.”

“Good.” I handed him the condom. “Put it on me.”

No hesitation whatsoever. He tore the wrapper with his teeth and let it flutter forgotten to the floor. Steadying my cock with one hand, he rolled the condom on with the other, and I focused on keeping my breathing slow and even. It had been so long, so fucking long, and just the familiar sensation of latex on my cock was enough to make my head spin.

When the condom was on—*fuck, yes, I want you so badly, Jordan*—I gestured at the bed. “Get on your hands and knees.” He stood, and as we both got onto the bed, I added, “Facing that way so Angel has a good view.”

Jordan’s head snapped up, and he glanced at Angel. I wondered if he’d forgotten Angel was even here. Whether he had or not, now he was certainly aware of that presence in the corner.

“Ever been fucked while someone else watches?” I asked while I stroked some lube onto my cock.

Jordan’s eyes flicked toward my cock, then my eyes. “Unfortunately, no, I haven’t.”

“Tonight’s your lucky night, then. Turn around.”

As ordered, he got up on his hands and knees while I knelt behind him. We were turned so Angel could see us in profile. So he could see just about everything.

Resting a hand on Jordan’s hip, I guided my cock to him. He tensed when I touched him. I didn’t pull away, just gave him a chance to relax and get used to me. *This* may not have been new to him, but I was new to him, as was Angel’s presence, and submission, and everything that had transpired between the wedding and now. He

wanted this, but it was uncharted territory for him, so I was patient.

And after a few seconds, I was rewarded with a long breath. Some of the tightness in his back and shoulders melted away. When I pressed against him again, I met a little resistance, but the soft moan he released told me I wasn't hurting him at all when I pushed past that resistance.

I dug my teeth into my lower lip. Watching myself slide into him, oh fucking hell, it was unreal. It had been ages, and I'd nearly forgotten just how amazing it felt to be inside someone, and just how fucking hot it looked from this vantage point.

He moaned again and let his head fall forward. A shudder rippled up his spine.

"You okay?" I asked.

He murmured something.

"I asked you a question, Jordan," I said sharply.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Good." I ran a gentle hand up his back and down again. Some more tension melted from his shoulders, and with every slow, easy stroke I took inside him, he relaxed a little more.

My eyes flicked toward Angel. He shifted in his chair, and I didn't have to see below his belt to know he was hard.

Focusing on Jordan again, I fucked him a little harder. At the outskirts of my awareness was a quiet, staccato beat. Fingers on the armrest or windowsill probably, a rapid tempo of *Angel's here, Angel's here, Angel's here*. Knowing those blue eyes were focused on me while I moved inside Jordan, I had to force myself not to come yet.

I concentrated on Jordan. I leaned forward, resting my hands on the bed beside his, and thrust from the hips. His arms and shoulders quivered. I thought a whispered "fuck" slipped off his lips.

"Like that?" I asked.

"Yes. God, yes."

"Can you come this way?" I murmured. "Just from me fucking you?"

He gasped as a shiver rippled up his spine, and when it had passed, he nodded.

"You can?" I kissed the back of his shoulder. "All I'd have to do is keep…fucking…you…"

"Yes," he moaned.

"You can." I shifted my tone from playful to commanding. "But you won't."

Jordan whimpered, shuddering beneath me, and I guessed he was even closer to coming now that I'd denied him.

"Don't you dare come yet, Jordan," I whispered, letting my lip brush the back of his neck. "I haven't given you permission."

Another frustrated sound, and he shuddered again. “Fuck…I’m…”

“You’re not going to come,” I growled. “Not until I say you will.”

He pulled in a deep breath and his shoulders tensed and trembled as he fought to stay in control.

“Oh God, Jordan,” I whispered, deliberately exhaling across his sweaty skin. “Oh God, you feel so fucking good, I’m…oh, fuck…”

Jordan moaned. His fingers clawed at the comforter, his arms quivering beneath him, and the frustrated sounds he made were almost more than I could take.

I pushed myself upright and moaned, thrusting a little harder as my orgasm closed in fast. From the corner of my eye, movement caught my attention. I turned my head just in time to see Angel shifting in his chair again. His lips parted and his eyes were fixed on me.

On us.

Watching me fuck Jordan.

Watching me unravel.

Oh, Jesus, watching me come.

I held Jordan’s hips to me, threw my head back and groaned. He moaned and shuddered, and I thought for a moment he might have come too. Even as my orgasm tapered, though, he didn’t relax. He took long, deep breaths, but the tension in his quivering shoulders didn’t release. I grinned to myself. He’d been close, damn close, but he’d held himself back.

I slid my hands up his back and gently kneaded his shoulders. “Good, Jordan,” I whispered. “You’ll get to come soon, don’t worry.”

I half expected a smartass retort, but he replied with little more than a vague nod. There would come a time when I’d demand quick, articulate responses, but he was still new to this. He’d obeyed a difficult order and kept his orgasm at bay. He could be forgiven, if only tonight, for an inability to speak. At this point, he was probably lucky to still be conscious.

I pulled out slowly and sat back. Jordan turned around, almost collapsing onto his back as he did.

“Fuck,” he murmured, wiping sweat from his brow.

I stood, resting a hand on the bed until my legs steadied themselves beneath me. While I took the condom off, I looked at Jordan.

“You’re going to make yourself come,” I said. “But only when I tell you to.” I gestured at the pillow. “Lie back, touch yourself. I’ll be right back.”

Jordan nodded. He did as ordered, lying back against the pillows. He closed his fingers around his cock, and my blood pressure skyrocketed as he stroked himself slowly.

“One thing, though, you—” I paused. “I didn’t say to stop, just keep…good.”

He looked at me through heavy-lidded eyes, his hand still moving, if a little slower now.

“Don’t even think of stopping *or* coming while I’m out of the room,” I said. “Angel will be keeping an eye on you.”

The low, frustrated groan that emerged from his lips made me grin. He closed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

Angel and I exchanged winks. Then I left to get rid of the condom. When I came back, Jordan was right where I’d left him, as was Angel. I gestured to Angel, and we both joined Jordan on the bed. It was a California king, so there was plenty of room for us to give him space, but what fun was that?

We both got right up next to him. Angel flicked his tongue across Jordan’s nipple. I kissed Jordan’s neck, tasting the heat and sweat on his skin as his moan reverberated against my lips. I could only imagine what went through his arousal-addled mind with two men touching and teasing him while he jerked himself off but couldn’t come.

I raised my head and watched him. The twin lines between his eyebrows deepened, and his back lifted off the bed when Angel teased his nipple again. Every muscle in Jordan’s arm tensed and shook as he stroked his own cock, and every sound that escaped his lips was made of pure, delicious aggravation.

“Don’t slow down,” I whispered. “And don’t come yet.”

“Fuck…” His cheek rippled as he clenched his jaw. “Oh God…”

“I know you can wait,” I whispered. “Just like you did while I was fucking you.”

He groaned, closing his eyes even tighter.

“You’ll hang on as long as I want you to, won’t you?”

Jordan tried to answer, but the flick of Angel’s tongue across his nipple caught him off guard. His eyes flew open and his back arched as he gasped.

“Answer me, Jordan,” I said. “You’ll keep going as long as I want you to, won’t you? Just like you did while—”

“*Yes*.” The word came out as a half groan, half cough. “Oh, fuck, oh, fuck…”

Keeping my tone low, calm and even, I leaned closer to his ear and said, “I know we’re frustrating you, Jordan. I know you want to come. You want to let go.” I fought to keep my amusement out of my voice when he whimpered. “I want you to stay right there on that edge. No pulling back, no going over.” Another whimper. “Not until I tell you that you can come.”

“Oh God…”

Angel sat back, propping his head up on one hand. Our eyes met over Jordan, and Angel licked his lips.

I leaned down again, not quite kissing Jordan's neck, just breathing on him. His own breathing quickened. Whispered curses rolled off his lips, and even though he was going out of his ever-loving mind, his hand kept moving.

He gasped. I thought he was about to lose it, thought he was about to let go and surrender, but he held back, and I rewarded him with a single whispered word:

"Come."

In a heartbeat, his back levitated off his bed, and semen landed on his abs and chest. The helpless, throaty groan that escaped his lips was easily one of the sexiest things I'd ever heard, and when Angel fidgeted beside him, I knew he was in agreement.

Jordan's hand slowed to a trembling stop. His eyes stayed closed, his brow stayed furrowed, and he took sharp gasps of breath through his parted lips.

Finally, he opened his eyes. At first, he stared up at the ceiling. Probably letting the spinning stop. God knew I was familiar with that feeling. He blinked a few times, then looked at me.

"You've done well." I leaned in to kiss him gently. "Even if I did frustrate the hell out of you."

A soft huff of laughter warmed my lips. He took and released a deep breath. "That was…unbelievable."

"In a good way or a bad way?" Angel asked.

"Good. Definitely good."

"That's what we like to hear," I said.

Jordan looked down at his chest and his hand. "Guess I should go clean this up, shouldn't I?" He started to sit up, so Angel and I each put a hand on his back to keep him steady. I moved so he could get to his feet, and I kept a hand on his arm until we were both sure he'd stay on his feet.

With his knees more or less steady, he went into the bathroom, and I got back on the bed with Angel. As soon as I was within reach, Angel kissed me, and as his tongue slipped between my lips, he guided my hand to the front of his pants.

"Hmm," I said. "I think someone's a bit turned on."

"Damn right. I've said it before, and I'll say it again," he said, his lips almost touching mine, "watching you fuck another man is so. Fucking. Hot."

"So you'd be game for doing it again?"

"Oh, you know I will."

I kissed him lightly. "I think I might like to watch you fuck him too."

Angel shivered and pressed his cock against my hand.

A moment later, Jordan returned. “So, I assume I’m not going to leave Angel out in the cold.”

Beside me, Angel squirmed with barely contained arousal.

“Depends on if you want to play with both of us tonight,” I said. “If you can handle two Doms.”

“Oh, I think I’ve got plenty left,” Jordan said to Angel.

Angel nodded toward me. “I think you should ask the man in charge.”

Jordan gulped and turned to me. “May I—” He cut himself off, biting his lower lip. Then he cleared his throat. “May I suck his cock?”

I smiled. “Absolutely.”

“In that case.” Angel stood. He pointed at the floor in front of him and looked at Jordan. “Why aren’t you on your knees yet?”

Chapter Ten

Jordan

Like they did every morning of my life, my eyes flew open at exactly six o'clock. This morning, I was a bit more bleary-eyed than usual, but it took my fatigue-fogged brain only a second to figure it out. The arm draped over my waist and the slow, rhythmic breathing beside me reminded me I wasn't alone. The slightly softer sound of someone else breathing reminded me *we* weren't alone.

I grinned to myself, remembering everything from last night. I'd have gladly stayed in bed a little longer, basking in the glow of the rising sun with the men responsible for the rugburns on my knees, but if I did, I'd likely fall asleep again. And if I fell asleep, I'd probably wake up to find my horses had eaten my barn. Even after a night of hot, long-overdue sex, duty called.

So, gently freeing myself from Dante's lazy grasp, I sat up. Moving as quietly as I could, I got out of bed and threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, all the while resisting the urge to just stare at Angel and Dante while they slept. There was a time not long ago when I'd have said it was a crime for any man to be that fucking beautiful, but since the guilty parties were both naked and asleep in my bed, I wasn't going to complain.

Slipping out of the bedroom, I went into the kitchen and put the coffee on, then headed down to the garage to get my dog and boots.

"Ready to go?" I scratched Sasha's ears as he yawned and stretched. When I reached for my boots, he jumped and spun in circles, tags jingling and claws rattling across the linoleum.

"Okay, okay, we're going." I laughed. "Just be patient."

He whined as I went for the door, and as soon as I opened it, he tore out of the garage and loped down the path ahead of me. Most mornings, I'd jog right beside him, but every muscle in my body ached this morning, so I settled for a brisk walk.

When I caught up with him, he bounced up and down in front of the barn.

"Has anyone mentioned to you that you're a senior dog?" I said as I unlatched the door. "You're supposed to mellow with age, dummy." I slid the barn door open, and as soon as he had enough room, Sasha wriggled through and took off down the aisle in a clatter of claws on concrete.

All down the aisle, shavings rustled and horses grunted and murmured sleepy greetings. It was a little odd, stepping back into my familiar world now, going through familiar motions in a body that had gone into some very alien territory last night. Wandering up and

down the aisle, distributing hay and grain over doors and into buckets, my aching body was on autopilot. My mind, however, went into overdrive.

For years, I'd wanted to try everything we'd done and everything we'd discussed. Power exchanges intrigued me, but the thought of actually handing over that power was intimidating to say the least. And yet with them, it had been…natural. My knees ached like hell this morning, but every twinge just reminded me of all the kneeling I'd done, so I didn't complain.

I'd finally had a taste of submission. *Consensual* submission. And I liked it. A lot.

Eli had been in control in our relationship, particularly where sex was concerned, but I was never his submissive. I never gave him control; he simply took it. Assumed it was his. And I'd always kept a bit from him, kept a wall between us.

With Angel and Dante, I lowered that wall. Perhaps more willingly than I should have, given that we'd just met, but they didn't rouse my usually hyperactive instinct of suspicion.

I should have felt outnumbered. Two of them, one of me. Granted, Angel sat back at the beginning and let Dante take charge, and Dante was the one giving me orders all evening, but Angel's silent authority was still there. Though he'd made little attempt to assert it, deferring most of last night to Dante, it was like we both knew if Angel gave a command, I'd have obeyed it. And I would have.

They seemed to be aware of their two-to-one advantage. They were conscious of that, of my inexperience, and of my nerves whenever they showed. All night long, they went out of their way not to overwhelm me. Of course they'd still pushed me to levels of frustration I'd never known existed, and they kept all three of my orgasms out of reach until they were damned good and ready to give them to me.

It was much too early in this strange interpretation of a relationship to tell where things would go, how this would progress, but at least where last night was concerned, it was perfect. Exactly the kind of men who could guide me into this lifestyle so I could see for myself if it was something I really wanted. And if last night was any indication, it was definitely something I wanted.

I took Arturo out of his stall and led him down to his turnout. He eyed the flake of hay under my other arm but wisely didn't reach for it. He knew better and waited patiently while I opened the gate and unclipped his lead rope. Then he jogged past me, stopped and waited for me to put the hay down before he dove into it.

I patted his neck. "Now would you kindly eat this and not the fence today, bud?"

He just sneezed.

Chuckling, I left the paddock, shut the gate and headed back into the barn.

The early feeding routine was usually enough to wake me up, particularly if it was a cool morning like this. Just walking down from the barn to the lower pasture was enough to shake me out of the grips of even a bad hangover, but this morning, I was still yawning on the way back up that path.

The car parked in front of my garage certainly did a number on my heart rate, though. Benign glass and painted steel, an inanimate object in my otherwise vacant driveway, and it screamed "last night was fucking *real*", and that thought hit my veins like a triple-shot of espresso.

I shook my head and went back into the barn to double-check I hadn't forgotten any of my various chores. It was a routine long since etched into my brain, but my mind was foggy as hell this morning thanks to the pair currently asleep in my bed. It wouldn't have surprised me if I'd forgotten to turn off a faucet on a water bucket or two or put a horse out in one of the muddy pastures without a blanket on.

All was well, though, so I started back toward the house.

"Sasha, come," I called out. He obediently ran out of a pasture and skidded to a stop right beside me. I reached down to pet him. "That's a good boy."

Together we walked back up to the house. In the garage, I dusted off my shirt and kicked off my boots. Then I grabbed a grungy towel off the washing machine so I could wipe Sasha's paws. Once he was more or less clean, I let him into the house.

Sasha trotted into the living room, and a moment later was quiet. Happily gnawing on a bone, knowing him.

I left him to his chewing and headed back up to the bedroom for a cleaner shirt. About halfway up the stairs, I paused. Crap, I needed to put Sasha outside before Dante got up.

Before I could backtrack and take Sasha into the backyard, though, Dante appeared at the top of the stairs, pulling his shirt on.

I continued up the last few steps. "Morning."

"Morning." He smiled sleepily and put a hand on my waist as he kissed me.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm usually up pretty early myself." He rubbed his eyes, then nodded toward the bedroom. "Just don't expect to see that one out of bed any time soon."

I chuckled. "Late sleeper?"

"God, yes. That, and your cat joined us after you left." He waved a

hand at the bedroom door again. “He won’t be up until she is.”

“Really?”

Dante rolled his eyes. “He can’t stand disturbing a sleeping cat.”

“If need be, a can opener will get her out of bed quick, fast and in a hurry.” I made a dismissive gesture. “Let them sleep. I’m not exactly throwing you guys out of here.” I nodded down the stairs. “The dog’s in the house, though. Do you want me—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Dante smiled, but a ripple ran down the front of his throat.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” The smile turned to a grin. “I should probably get used to him sooner or later, don’t you think?”

God, yes, they want to do this again. “I guess you should, shouldn’t you?” I returned the grin. “Anyway, coffee?”

“Please.”

We went downstairs to the kitchen, and I poured us some coffee. While we drank, the click of Sasha’s nails on the wood floor made Dante’s eyes widen a little. When my dog appeared in the doorway, I pointed at the living room, snapped my fingers and said, “Sasha, living room.”

He gave Dante a curious glance, but when I snapped my fingers again, he obediently trotted out of the kitchen.

Dante watched the empty doorway warily before taking another sip of coffee.

“So, did you have a bad experience with a dog or something?” I asked. “I mean, if it’s not too personal.”

Dante set his coffee cup down. “I think we’ve gone well past the point of having to worry about getting too personal, don’t you think?”

“Good point.”

“To answer your question,” he said quietly, “yes, I did have a bad experience with a dog. When I was really little, my dad tried to convince me a neighbor’s black lab was friendlier than it was, and it snapped at us. Fortunately got his hand instead of my face, because he had to have quite a few stitches.”

I blinked. “Wow, I’ve never known a lab to be so aggressive.”

Dante shrugged, and I wondered if it was partly a shudder. “That one was, and that’s my earliest memory of dogs. I’ve just never been comfortable around them.” His eyes darted toward the empty doorway again. Then he picked up his coffee cup and took a sip.

“Are you okay with other animals, though?” I asked.

“Sure, I like animals.” He gestured in the general direction of the stairs leading up to my bedroom. “Not quite as head-over-heels crazy about them as Angel, but I like them.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I’ve noticed he’s quite the critter person.”

"You ain't kiddin'."

"Any pets?"

"He has a cat." He laughed softly. "She doesn't like me all that much."

"You're not mean to her or anything, are you?"

"No, no, of course not." He set his coffee down and rested his hip against the counter. "But I have no qualms about moving her if she's in the way, and I'll drag Angel out of bed even when she wants to sleep in."

"Oh, God, even I'm not that bad," I said. "He really won't disturb her?"

"God no. Whatever that little princess wants, she gets." He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Kind of amusing, don't you think?" I said into my coffee cup. "A Dom who's completely wrapped around a cat's paw?"

"About as appropriate as a submissive who's the alpha over his dogs and horses."

"Good point." I set my cup down. "Hadn't really thought of it that way, but yeah, I'm a total alpha with the animals. People, not so much."

"Nothing wrong with that." Dante's smile just then was seductive enough to make my knees tremble. "You just needed someone who likes to be an alpha with other people."

"An alpha without being a dick, anyway," I muttered.

He raised an eyebrow. "Ex?"

I nodded. "Long story." I chewed my lip and dropped my gaze for a second, then met his eyes. "But, I think I like the arrangement *we* have."

"Good to know, because Angel and I do too." He paused. "I have to be honest, I was a little worried when we came over last night."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I thought we might've moved a bit fast in the studio." He shifted his weight and picked up his coffee again. "And we probably did. We just figured we needed to either put it out there or keep hoping you eventually found a reason to come back."

I finished my coffee and turned to refill it. Over my shoulder, I said, "Truth be told, I probably would have found a reason to come back."

"Also good to know. But it seemed only fair, being Doms, we should make the first move."

"I suppose that's true."

He was moving behind me. Coming closer. He waited until I'd set the coffeepot aside, then put his hands on my waist. "And by the way, last night was incredible." He kissed the back of my neck. The

contradictory softness of his lips and coarse scrape of his unshaven jaw made my breath catch. He went on, “We’re just getting started, but I think you are exactly the submissive we’ve been looking for.”

I turned around to face him. Putting my arms around his neck, I said, “Well, I think you two are exactly what I’ve been looking for. Just, you know, two instead of one.”

“Two Doms for the price of one.” He traced my lower lip with his thumb. “Can’t argue with that, now can you?”

“Seems like I’m getting the better end of the deal, though.”

Dante held me a little closer and leaned in to kiss me. “Oh, you’re not. Trust me on this one.” He ran his fingers through my hair—they both did that a lot, and I so loved it—and his expression turned serious. “Just tell us if it’s too much for you. I’m serious. As we get into more hardcore kink and really start pushing your limits, having two Doms might get intimidating.” He touched my face. “You can always rein it back, or just play with one of us at a time.”

“Somehow, I think I’ll be all right.”

He smiled, and the playfulness was back. “You sure?”

“Definitely.”

He started to speak again, but footsteps shuffling in the hallway turned both our heads.

“I’ll be damned, he’s up,” Dante said.

“Wonders never—” I paused, my chest tightening with preemptive annoyance. “Actually, I’d be willing to bet it’s—” I let go of Dante. He instantly got the message, releasing me and taking a step back so we weren’t close enough to raise more questions than his very presence inevitably would.

As if on cue, my ex-boyfriend stepped into the kitchen. He took a couple of steps toward the coffeepot, then stopped in his tracks, staring wide-eyed at Dante. A million questions put three deep creases in Eli’s forehead, but he just shook his head and turned to get himself some coffee.

Dante and I quietly sipped our coffee while Eli went about making his breakfast. Everything he did had just a little more force than usual. A cabinet door banging shut harder than it needed to. A coffee cup slamming against the countertop. *Oh, goody. I’m going to hear about this later*. Knowing him, he’d take off to the living room to eat, so we’d be left in relative peace before long. I gave Dante an apologetic shrug. He smiled behind his coffee cup.

Then came more footsteps. Eli’s brow furrowed, and he slowly turned his head toward the kitchen doorway.

Oh, shit.

Awkward moment in three…two…

Angel appeared wearing only a pair of jeans and my cat slung

over his shoulder. His eyes immediately darted toward Eli, then Dante, then me, and the smirk that played at his lips almost made me snort with laughter. The four of us just stared at each other. The only sounds in the room were Cally purring contentedly on Angel's shoulder and the coffeepot making its usual clicking and gurgling noises.

Finally, Eli dumped his coffee in the sink, set the cup down so hard he almost broke the damned thing, and left without a word. As soon as his steps had faded down the hall, all three of us exhaled.

Angel's eyes flicked in the direction Eli had gone, then back to us. "Was it something I said?"

I let go of a laugh. "God, I am so going to hear about this later."

Dante chuckled. "We could explain it to him if—"

"No, no, that's quite all right." I shook my head. To Angel, I said, "Coffee?"

"God, yes." He set my cat on the floor while I poured him a cup.

The three of us stood around my kitchen island making small talk for a while. It took each of us two cups of coffee to finally wake up completely.

Eventually, Dante looked at the clock on the microwave and sighed. To Angel, he said, "I guess we should get going if we're going to get to work on time."

"You have to work today?" I asked.

Angel pursed his lips and nodded. "No rest for the soundly fucked, I guess."

"Apparently not," I said.

"So, do you have plans tonight?" Angel asked.

I shook my head.

"Why don't you come to our place?" Dante asked.

Angel grinned. "We'll show you some of our toys."

"I like the sound of that," I said. *Holy shit, these two are going to be the death of me*.

"Oh, just wait." The devilish sparkle in Angel's eyes made me shiver. I could only imagine being with the two of them in their natural environment with all their toys and tricks of the trade. As if they'd had any difficulty on my turf and without the aid of whatever qualified as "toys" in their world.

After everyone had dressed, we strolled out to the driveway where their car was parked.

"So we'll see you tonight?" Dante asked. "At our place?"

"Assuming the directions get me there, yes."

Angel looked at Dante. "We're going to have to work on his mouthiness, don't you think?"

Dante slid a firm hand around the back of my neck and pulled me

closer to him. “I think we’ll manage.” Whatever mouthy remark I might have thought to give right then slipped my mind when he kissed me. It didn’t matter how many times we’d kissed last night; his mouth did to me what only one other man’s could do.

And that other man was standing by to do just that as soon as Dante let me go.

“If you guys keep kissing me like that,” I said after Angel was done working his magic, “I’m going to end up dragging you both back upstairs.”

Angel shrugged. “I could be—”

“*Angel*.” Dante raised an eyebrow.

He put his hands up. “What?”

“Work.” Dante pointed at the car. “Come on, I really don’t want to have to explain to Troy, Phoebe and Kendra why we’re both late.”

Angel clicked his tongue. “Fine. We’ll do what *you* want to do.”

I gave a melodramatic sigh. “I guess that means we’ll just have to finish this tonight.”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Dante said, meeting my eyes with the most spine-tingling intensity. “We will.”

After another kiss apiece, each lasting much longer than they should have if any of us thought to get any work done today, they got in the car. They drove off, kicking up a cloud of dust as they went down the long strip of gravel, and even after they’d turned at the end, I watched the empty driveway until that dust cloud dissipated. Once they were out of sight, I was almost certain every moment from last night until now had been a dream. Even the mild aches in my knees and shoulders and the twinges in my neck and lower back were barely enough to convince me it had all been real.

Oh, but it was. And tomorrow, there would be more aches like these.

For now, like Angel and Dante, I had work to do, so I went inside to get Sasha and continue my day.

In spite of my counting down the minutes until that evening, the day flew by. Such was the beauty of a demanding job: there was minimal downtime. If I wasn’t showing horses to potential buyers, I was working the horses I was either training to sell or being paid to train for someone else. Then there were fences to fix, horses to turn out and bring in, boarders to appease when turnout schedules and stall assignments weren’t satisfactory. One thing after another, all damned day.

I finally caught up with Laura in the afternoon as she came out of the barn office.

“Hey, Laura,” I said. “Would you mind feeding late tonight and in the morning for me?”

"Yeah, sure," she said. "You going to be around tomorrow?"

"Oh, yeah, I just won't be in until a bit later in the morning."

Laura smiled. "No problem."

"You're a saint. I owe you."

"You're right, you do." She kept a serious expression for all of two seconds; then we both laughed and went in separate directions to continue with our various tasks.

Laura lived only a mile or so up the road, so I didn't feel too bad about the imposition. That, and I rarely asked. *Though I might be asking more in the foreseeable future*.

With the next two feedings squared away, I was free for the evening, so I went inside to get cleaned up and ready to go. I made a quick stop at my computer to make sure Dante had e-mailed me the directions to their house, which he had. Just his name on my list of unread e-mails made my heart race. *We're really doing this again. Holy shit.*

I printed the directions, turned off the computer, and went into the bathroom to grab a shower and change clothes. When I got out of the shower, it was a little past five, so I still had plenty of time to get to their place.

I pulled a polo shirt out of the drawer but paused.

"Unbutton your shirt." Dante's voice—and Angel's from the studio the other night—echoed in my mind. Goose bumps rose on my back and arms, and I put the polo back, reaching for a button-down instead.

Then I went back downstairs for a quick bite to eat before I took off.

And, of course, He Whose Name Made Me Roll My Eyes showed up just in time to put a damper on my good spirits.

He leaned against the counter. "Heading out?"

"Yeah. I'll probably be—" Why the hell was I explaining myself to him? "I'm going out."

He pursed his lips, and I braced myself for the barrage of questions. Or accusations. Or accusations dressed up like questions.

"So are you—"

"I'll be out late," I broke in. "Would you please make sure Sasha's in his kennel before you go to bed?"

"Whatever."

I glared at him. "Eli."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I'll make sure he's taken care of."

"Thank you."

"So, you're going out with…them?"

Pulling my jacket on, I said, "I'm going *out*."

"I'm just asking."

"And if I answer, I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't." I picked

up my wallet and keys off the counter. “If I’m going out with them, I’m rubbing it in your face that I’m moving on. If I’m—”

“So you *are* going out with them.” He folded his arms across his chest and gave me that accusing glare I’d seen so fucking many times.

“I’m going out.” I shoved my wallet into my back pocket. “That’s all you need to know.”

“Fine,” he snapped.

I glared at him again. “What’s the problem?”

“No problem.” He showed his palms and shrugged. “You’re free to do whatever you want. You *are* single, after all.” The bitterness and sarcasm mingling in his tone irritated me even more.

“Glad to know I have your permission.” But the words hung in empty air, his footsteps echoing down the hall. I muttered a string of profanity into that air and glared at the empty doorway.

On my way out to the car, I sighed. I didn’t need this. I just didn’t. I’d already spent a few years of my life playing surrogate parent to two teenagers. Now I was damn near doing the same for him, and was he *ever* playing the petulant kid.

And the man wondered why I’d called it quits with him.

Chapter Eleven

Angel

"Jordan called while you were in the shower," Dante said when I stepped out of the bedroom. "Said he's on his way. Should be here soon."

"And you're still working?"

He gave me a sheepish look over his laptop screen. "Would you believe me if I said I was playing Minesweeper?"

"Not a chance." I brushed my hair out of my eyes. "There hasn't been nearly enough swearing coming from this room."

He shrugged. "Maybe I was winning."

"Uh-huh."

"Are you mocking my Minesweeper prowess?"

"I am, actually."

He flipped me the bird.

I laughed and went around behind the couch. Leaning over him, I kissed his neck and murmured, "That doesn't look like Minesweeper to me."

"Maybe I was—"

"No more working." I kissed his cheek and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "The devil on your shoulder says so."

He leaned back to meet my eyes. "I thought you were the angel on my shoulder."

I kissed him lightly. "I'm whatever spiritual entity will get you off this couch to get ready before Jordan gets here."

"I *am* ready." He tilted his head to one side so his damp hair brushed my arm. "See? Showered and all."

"Mm-hmm." I leaned down to nibble his earlobe. "And if you keep working, you'll be too distracted when he shows up. Which means I'd have to take care of him all by myself."

"I don't think so."

"Then stop working." I kissed the side of his neck, closing my eyes and taking in a long breath of his familiar scent.

Dante squirmed against the back of the couch, murmuring softly as I inched down toward his collar. "Okay, I'll stop working, but please keep doing that."

"If I do, we'll be done before he even gets here." I stood. "Come on. Close the laptop, off the couch."

"Oh fine." With a dramatic sigh, he closed the laptop and set it on the coffee table but didn't get up. Instead, he leaned back and draped his arm across the back of the couch. "We have a little time to kill. You could always join me."

“Well, I’m certainly not going to pass that up.” I laid back on the couch with my head in his lap and my feet over the armrest. He rested one hand on my chest and stroked my hair with the other. I put my hand over his, running my fingers back and forth across his skin. Seconds after I’d settled into place, Jade appeared on the back of the couch, then leaped onto my stomach.

I grunted. “Jesus, cat. You’re heavier than you look, you know that?”

“Well, if you’d stop feeding her that expensive canned shit—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” We both petted the cat for a minute until she flopped down to go to sleep on my chest. Still idly petting her, I looked up at Dante. “So, do you think Jordan will stick around for a while?”

“God, I hope so.” He absently wrapped and unwrapped a piece of my hair around his finger. “He seems to enjoy it so far.”

“True, but we haven’t exactly thrown a lot at him yet.” I grinned. “Let’s see how he does when I come at him with some hot wax.”

Dante shuddered. “Might want to wait a little while to broach that subject, don’t you think?”

“We’ll see how he handles tonight,” I said. “Maybe do some pain play next time, and I’ll bring it up then. I have a funny feeling he’ll like it.”

“I guess we’ll see how—”

Jade’s head snapped up. Her satellite-dish-sized ears turned toward the front of the house, and her eyes reached cartoonish proportions. Normally I didn’t pay attention when she did that—she’d jump if a spider tripped in the next room—but this time, I listened. Sure enough, a car door slammed outside.

I met Dante’s eyes. “Ready to play?”

“You’d better believe it.” He picked up the cat off my chest. “Time for you to move, lady.”

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the couch while Dante got up to let Jordan in. Excitement tingled at the base of my spine, creeping upward at the same speed as the barely audible footsteps approaching outside.

Dante opened the door before Jordan could knock, and my heart fluttered when Jordan stepped into the house. The tux he’d worn the day we met was long gone, but I was starting to wonder if it had really had anything to do with why I’d been tripping over my own feet at the wedding. His dark hair was casually arranged, like he’d given it just enough effort to make it look presentable but knew full well it would be disheveled as hell by the time we were done with him. And that ass…those jeans…

Fuck, he was hot.

And here he was. In our territory. Oh, this was going to be a fun evening.

"Jacket?" I held out my hand.

He started to shrug it off but paused. "Wait, should I be making you hang it up? You being the Dom and all?"

Dante laughed. "Under normal circumstances, yes, but Mr. Neurotic here will have a fit if it's not hung properly, so…" He gestured at me.

"Quiet, you," I said. Jordan handed me his coat, and I hung it on one of the hooks beside the door, making sure it was straight, and—

I looked at Jordan and Dante. Jordan pressed his lips together to keep a straight face. Dante didn't even try.

I clicked my tongue and rolled my eyes. "Oh, fuck you both."

They both snickered.

"Bastards," I muttered. Still snickering, they followed me down the hall. I opened the guest room door and gestured for Jordan to go in.

"Why do I feel like the lamb being led to slaughter?" Jordan asked as Dante shut the door behind us.

"Maybe you are," I deadpanned.

Jordan's eyes widened with alarm. Then he looked around the room. Dante and I didn't say anything for a moment and just let him take in his surroundings.

To the unsuspecting eye, this was a simply appointed and rarely used guest bedroom. A chest of drawers, a queen-size bed, a pair of nightstands, and a couple of lamps. There were no outward indications of all the reasons why Dante and I had to do a thorough sweep of the room any time we hosted family or other guests with whom we didn't plan to have kinky relations. "Sanitizing it," Dante always said.

It wasn't because of dust bunnies or clutter. Not in *my* house. It was just necessary to make sure my parents didn't open a drawer full of nipple clamps and ball gags, or Dante's dad didn't find several varieties of lubricant in the nightstand along with a metric ton of condoms and a bottle of peppermint oil. It was awkward enough when my sister, dropping in unexpectedly, found an ankle restraint we'd missed in our rush to sanitize the room. I'd go to my grave wondering if she opened the closet and found the rack of floggers and cat o' nine tails we'd completely neglected to stash. She'd probably go to hers before she ever admitted to seeing it. All I knew was, ever since then, she always made sure to give us ample warning before dropping in.

"What do you think?" Dante asked.

"I was expecting something a bit, I don't know, scarier," Jordan said.

“Pastels and curtains make good camouflage,” Dante said.

“That, and it’s a total headfuck.” I made a sweeping gesture at our unassuming surroundings. “After all, what could *possibly* happen in a room like this?”

Jordan’s eyes widened. He glanced at Dante. “You ought to take a picture of him like that.”

Dante cocked his head, glancing at me. “What do you mean?”

“Look at him.” Jordan nodded toward me. “All in black, grinning like the bastard lovechild of the devil and the Cheshire cat, surrounded by…” A sharp wave to indicate the décor. “It’s like Satan himself wandered into a Pottery Barn advertisement.”

Dante snorted with laughter. I raised an eyebrow and eyed Jordan, struggling to keep my own amusement contained.

I rested a hand on the back of Jordan’s neck. “You know, you’re awfully mouthy for a submissive who doesn’t know what I have up my sleeve yet.”

He gulped.

“In fact…” I ran my other thumb along his lower lip. “Just to make sure you know your place, I think Mr. Ball-gag might want to have a word with you this evening.”

His eyes widened again. More when a drawer behind me opened, then closed. Keeping one hand on the back of his neck, I held out my other, and Dante placed a gag in it. Not a ball gag, of course. Neither of us ever used one on a novice sub. But it was a gag nonetheless, and Jordan regarded it uncertainly.

“Now,” I said, taking a step back. “Why don’t we get things started?” I verbally undressed him in the same sequence Dante had the other night. Shirt unbuttoned. Taken off. Handed to me. Belt off. Jeans and boxers off. He kept his eyes down the entire time, but I didn’t miss the wary glances at the gag dangling from my still-outstretched hand.

Once he’d completely stripped, I came toward him again. I put my free hand on the back of his neck and kissed him, pressing my body against his to emphasize the fact that I was dressed and he was not, contrasting his vulnerability to my lack thereof. Just as I’d hoped, he shivered.

I broke the kiss and pulled back but didn’t take my hand off him. Our eyes met.

My fingers pressed ever so gently into his neck, and my eyes flicked toward the floor, then met his again.

Without a hint of hesitation, he went to his knees.

I ran my fingers through his hair. “Look at me, Jordan.”

He released a breath, his shoulders dropping. Then he lifted his chin and, after another second, his eyes. I resisted the urge to shiver.

There was nothing in his expression but pure, beautiful submission, the kind of surrender that was so damned arousing, it could bring me to *my* knees. The light in the middle of the ceiling highlighted his hair, his high cheekbones, and those wide please-let-me eyes.

His forehead creased slightly, and I remembered he was waiting for me to speak.

I held up the gag. "You're going to wear this until one of us says otherwise. Understood?"

His eyes flicked back and forth a few times between the gag and me before he responded to my question with a subtle nod.

"Since you won't be able to speak," I said. "Your safe word will either be two grunts or you can put your hand up. Clear?"

He nodded again.

"It's not in your mouth yet," I said, my tone flat. "You can still speak." I raised my eyebrow.

"Yes, it's clear," he said.

"Good. Now open your mouth."

I put the gag on him, fastening the strap behind his head so it wouldn't move but wouldn't be unduly uncomfortable. I'd worn one a few times myself, since Dante and I always experimented on each other before trying things on submissives. If there was one thing that could kill the mood for me, it was a gag pinching the corners of my mouth or a strap digging into the back of my head.

With the gag in place and as close to comfortable as such a thing could be, I went around behind him. I put my foot in the middle of his back and pushed him forward onto his hands. For a moment, I kept my foot there, hard enough to let him know he wasn't moving from this position. Jordan's back tried to arch. Not to push me away, but like a cat pressing against a hand.

"Stay just like that," I said. "Don't move."

Jordan nodded.

I took my foot away, and just as ordered, he didn't move. I knelt behind him and ran my fingertips up and down his back, watching goose bumps rise in their wake.

"One of these days," I said, "I'll get to see what your back looks like when it's covered in welts from a flogger. Maybe a whip." A shudder straightened his spine. Trailing a single fingertip down the center of his back, I said, "Maybe some hot wax?"

Another shudder. More goose bumps. I looked at Dante, who leaned against the door, arms folded across his chest and feet crossed at the ankles. The grin that spread across his lips was nearly as arousing as the naked, gagged submissive in front of me.

I turned my attention back to Jordan and slid my hand up the center of his spine, the back of his neck, and into his hair. When I

tightened my grasp and pulled back enough to make sure it smarted, he moaned.

"Would you want me to do that, Jordan?" I whispered. "Flog you? Maybe drop hot wax on your skin?"

He nodded as much as my grip on his hair allowed and murmured, "Mm-hmm."

"I thought you would." I released his hair. "For now, I'm going to fuck you. And you're not going to come until one of us allows it, will you?"

He shook his head and grunted something like "no".

"Good." While I got undressed myself, Jordan alternated between watching me, looking at the floor in front of him, and closing his eyes while drawing slow breaths. *Oh, Jordan, if you think you're turned on now…*

Jordan sat up as Dante handed him a condom and lube bottle. Jordan's cheek rippled. Probably clenching his teeth on the gag. He set the lube down and started to raise the condom to his mouth to, I guessed, tear the wrapper. Evidently remembering the gag, he tore the wrapper with his fingers instead.

He looked up at me, and I nodded. Once he'd put the condom and lube on me, I said, "Turn around."

Of course, he did so without hesitating, and when I nudged his back with my foot, leaned forward on his hands. I put my hand on his hip and took a deep breath. I pressed against him, giving just the head of my cock before pulling back. Then a little more. Withdrew. Still a little more. Slowly, gently, letting him relax around me and get used to me. That, and this was the first time I'd fucked him, and I intended to savor every second of it.

I held my breath and watched myself slide deeper into him. It was one thing to fuck Dante. It was always understood Dante had as much control as I did, and he exercised it. Changing speed, changing position, coming when he was damned good and ready to.

Jordan, like every submissive, had relinquished control. He'd get as much as I gave him. He'd stay in this position or change it on my whim. He'd come when I allowed it and not a moment sooner.

I'd missed this, and now I had it. I glanced up at Dante. He moistened his lips, and when he started unbuttoning his shirt, I shivered and couldn't help fucking Jordan just a *little* faster.

Jordan groaned around the gag. His fingers clawed at the floor, and his gorgeous, sculpted shoulders quivered and twitched as my strokes became thrusts. Oh, my God, I couldn't decide if he looked or felt sexier, but he and his body and his submission were fucking amazing.

Dante knelt in front of Jordan. "I'm going to take the gag off, and

you're going to suck my cock. Understood?"

Jordan nodded.

Dante undid the strap and gently removed the gag. As soon as it was out of the way, Jordan was on Dante's cock, stroking and sucking vigorously. Dante closed his eyes and whimpered. Watching his face, I fucked Jordan harder. Jordan moaned softly and, judging by Dante's gasp, doubled his efforts on Dante's cock. Dante turned me on, I turned Jordan on, Jordan turned Dante on, and on and on and on, until I was sure every last one of us would lose it at the same time.

Dante threw his head back, moving his hips in time with Jordan's mouth. "Oh, fuck," he whispered. "That's…oh, fuck, that's incredible."

My legs burned and my back ached, but I didn't back off. It had to be painful for Jordan by now, but judging by the way he groaned and fucked Dante with his mouth, he loved it. He loved it, and so did I, and I couldn't take much more of it. Gritting my teeth, I screwed my eyes shut, dug my fingers in, gave Jordan everything I had, and came.

All at once, Jordan shuddered, and with a moan of helpless defeat, he came too.

Dante grabbed Jordan's hair and jerked his head up. "Did anyone say you could come yet?"

"No." Jordan paused, trying to catch his breath. "No, I'm sorry, I __"

"We might have to punish you for that," Dante said.

"I'm—" Jordan said.

I pulled out. "You going to do it again?"

"N-no."

"Damn right you're not." I leaned forward and growled in his ear. "In fact, between now and the next time we play with you…" I glanced up at Dante, who nodded. Then I went on, "…you won't come at all."

Jordan sucked in a breath.

I moistened my lips. "Clear?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Hmm," I said. "And we won't be able to play again until Wednesday night."

"That's, what?" Dante said. "Four days? Five days?"

"Four, I think," I said.

"Five," Jordan said. "Five days."

I grinned. "Good. Plenty of time."

I nodded at Dante, then got up to take care of the condom. When I returned, I stopped to get a pair of handcuffs from the chest of drawers.

Dante still had Jordan on his knees. Like the evil bastard he was—God, I loved him—he stroked himself just inches from Jordan's mouth,

and Jordan's eyes flicked back and forth from Dante's cock to his face.

"Normally, I'd let you suck me off," Dante said to Jordan. "That, or I'd fuck you. But since you came without permission…" He looked past Jordan at me and nodded. Jordan looked over his shoulder, and his gaze immediately went to the cuffs in my hand. His lips parted.

I knelt behind him and pulled one wrist around to his lower back. Before I'd even cuffed it, he offered up the other hand. I bound them together. Then I went around him to Dante.

"Since you came without permission," Dante said to Jordan, "I can't reward you by letting you do something you like, can I?"

Jordan released his breath. "No."

"But that still leaves me with a hard-on." Dante winked at me.

I put my hand on Dante's waist. "Guess I'll have to do something about that, then."

"Hmm, I guess you will."

With my other hand, I pushed Dante's out of the way and wrapped my fingers around his cock, making sure everything I did was fully visible to Jordan. Dante kissed me, I stroked his cock, and Jordan exhaled sharply.

Then I went to my knees. Looking right at Jordan, I ran my tongue along the underside of Dante's cock. The chain between the handcuffs creaked, and the frustrated sound he made was almost as arousing as Dante's moans. I glanced up at Dante, then focused on giving him an enthusiastic blowjob.

Jordan was desperate to please us both, and if I'd read him right, enjoyed sucking cock as much as I did. His mouth must have been watering, wishing his hand and mouth were around Dante's cock like this. The closer Dante got to coming, the more Jordan pulled against his cuffs, the chain protesting and clinking as he released a sharp breath through his teeth.

"Ooh, yeah," Dante moaned. "That's…fuck, just…" He whimpered, tangling his fingers in my hair as his cock pulsed against my lips. "Don't stop, Angel…don't…oh God…" His breath caught, his hips jerked slightly, and a second later, salty-sweet semen shot across my tongue.

I licked my lips and sat back. Then I stood, shared a quick kiss with my breathless, trembling Dante, and walked around behind Jordan again.

I knelt and unfastened the cuffs. "Looks like you'll have marks on your wrists tomorrow."

Jordan eyed the angry red half-moons under the heels of his hands, then shrugged. "They'll fade. I'm not too concerned."

"True, they will." I stood and offered him my hand. After I'd helped him to his feet, I put my arms around his waist. "You okay?"

He nodded, a hint of a grin curling the corners of his mouth. “You two know how to frustrate, don’t you?”

I winked. “We’re Doms. It’s what we do.” Raising an eyebrow, I added, “Especially when a sub doesn’t do what he’s told.”

His cheeks colored, and he dropped his gaze. I lifted his chin and kissed him gently.

“You’re still learning,” I whispered. “Don’t worry about it.”

He searched my eyes, then smiled. “I really, honestly tried not to come.”

“I know you did.” I touched his face and grinned. “But we’re still going to punish you, just because we can.”

He laughed. “Evil bastards.”

“Damn right we are.” I kissed him again. “And even though it’ll be frustrating as all hell, if you obey us and see your punishment through, it’ll be worth it.”

Jordan chuckled. “I think I can handle it.”

“We could make it ten days,” I said.

Jordan put up a hand and shook his head. “No, no, five is fine.”

“That’s what I thought,” Dante said. “So behave yourself.”

The three of us got into the guest room bed. It was much too hot for the comforter, but we pulled the sheet up over us. Even the sheet was a bit warm, but I wanted to make sure Jordan didn’t get cold.

“So are you still enjoying being a submissive?” I asked.

“For the most part,” Jordan said.

“For the most part?” Dante trailed a fingertip down Jordan’s arm.

“Well, the punishments and frustration take a little getting used to.”

“Get used to them,” I said. “They’ll only get worse.”

“Great.”

“It’ll be worth it.” Dante kissed Jordan’s cheek. “With great frustration comes great payoff.”

Jordan furrowed his brow. “I thought the quote was, with great power comes great responsibility.”

“That applies to Doms,” I said. “We modified it a little to fit subs.”

“So I see.”

“You know, as long as you’re still enjoying this,” I said, “I was thinking we could push a few boundaries next time. Maybe a little pain play?”

Jordan licked his lips. “I’m definitely game for that.”

“Somehow I figured you would be.”

“And speaking of pushing boundaries, I’m curious,” Dante said. “We did that photo shoot in our studio the other night, but would you be interested in doing it again?”

Jordan shrugged. “I liked how the last shoot went, so…”

“Well, you saw the stuff in our portfolios.” Dante’s eyes darted toward me, then returned to Jordan. “The ones with…both of us.”

“Yeah, I know which ones you mean.”

“We were thinking,” I said, resting my hand on Jordan’s arm. “Would you want to do some like that? A bit more explicit?”

Jordan gulped. For a moment, I thought he’d pass, but then he nodded. “Yeah, I’d be game for that. I mean, I assume the photos would be…”

“Confidential?” Dante said.

“Yeah. You know, in case one of my clients ever decides to become one of your clients?”

“Don’t worry,” I said, running my hand along his arm. “We always keep them confidential and under wraps unless a model specifically allows it.”

“I figured as much, but thought I’d check.” He pursed his lips. “Seems like I ought to do something for you guys, though.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” I dropped a light kiss on Jordan’s bare shoulder. “You’re doing more than enough for us.”

Jordan laughed softly. “You know what I mean.”

“And really, you’re modeling for us.” Dante idly ran his hand up and down Jordan’s arm again. “So if anyone owes anyone…”

“Okay, point taken,” Jordan said. “But I could swap, say, riding lessons or something like that.”

I looked at Dante. “Hey, why don’t you take him up on that?”

Dante glared at me. “Besides the part about getting on a horse?”

“Oh, go on.” I smiled. “You might enjoy it.”

Dante’s eyes darted back and forth between us. Finally, he exhaled. “Oh hell, why not?”

“Sweet,” Jordan said. “I think it’ll be fun.”

Chapter Twelve

Jordan

Five days without an orgasm. I figured I could handle that. After all, I'd gone much longer when Eli and I were together. *Many* times.

Then again, when he and I were together, I was so stressed and depressed half the time, I didn't feel like having sex or jerking off. This was different, though. When I was under strict orders not to come, and I knew my next orgasm would be at the hands of Angel and Dante, *and* they'd promised some boundary-pushing pain play, five days was fucking *brutal*.

If ever there came a test of my resolve to obey them and see this through, it came—so to speak—on the fourth night.

Trying to think about anything except how badly I needed to do something about this ache below the belt, I'd gone downstairs to make myself something for dinner. While it cooked, I went through a stack of DVDs I'd bought but hadn't yet watched, trying to find the stupidest, goriest crapfest I owned. Preferably one with no shirtless, sweaty men.

I thought about watching *Resident Evil* but quickly shoved it back into the stack. Great. I was so spun up, I couldn't even convince myself to sit through a damned zombie movie without needing to pause it for a little "break". *God, I'm really pathetic*. In my defense, though, zombies and gore weren't nearly enough to cancel out James Purefoy in a leather jacket. Even if I wasn't this horny, I'd probably still have to pause it.

I sighed and decided to skip a movie. Just one more night, then work would distract me tomorrow, and I'd be—

No, Jordan, don't even think about tomorrow night.

My dinner was ready at that point, thankfully. I took it out of the oven, grabbed the newspaper off the counter, and sat at the kitchen table to eat, read, and not think about how horny I was.

I was two coma-inducing pages into the business section when headlights shone through the window and arced across the kitchen wall. Sasha barked, though without much enthusiasm. Out of habit, my stomach turned, but I couldn't help grinning. Eli's presence annoyed the hell out of me, which made him the perfect mood killer. For the first time in months, I welcomed his irritating, teeth-grinding presence.

I welcomed it until he walked in, anyway.

Because he wasn't alone.

Slack-jawed, I stared at them over the top of the newspaper, wondering if they were completely oblivious to me or if this was

intentional. Whatever the case, they were certainly enamored of each other. I didn't think Eli even knew how to kiss that passionately. That, or I couldn't be bothered thinking back that far into our past to remember.

The newspaper in my hand crinkled, and in spite of the enthusiastic moaning and heavy breathing, Eli must have heard it, because he looked up and did a double take.

"Oh. Jordan." He blinked a few times, doing a piss poor job of appearing innocent or even surprised. "I didn't…realize you were home."

Through my teeth, I said, "My car is right next to yours."

"Oh." His face reddened, but the grin cancelled out any hint of embarrassment. He snaked an arm around his companion's waist. "This is Curt, by the way. One of the bartenders from that club downtown. Curt, this is Jordan."

Curt the Bartender and I exchanged awkward "nice to meet you" greetings. Then he and my ex went back to swapping spit and stumbling down the hall. I groaned and glared up at the ceiling, pretending I couldn't hear them even after the door closed downstairs.

A moan made it past the door, up the stairs and into the kitchen. Then another. One more, with feeling this time.

I gritted my teeth. Jesus Christ on a pogo stick. Really? Fucking *really*?

I slammed the newspaper down, then went in and put away my barely touched dinner. I took the stairs up to my bedroom two at a time, shut the door and leaned against it. Closing my eyes, I rubbed my temples, certain I could still hear Eli and Curt the Bartender, even though there was an entire floor between us.

Then a cry did make it up to me. Holy shit. From opposite floors in a three-story house and through two closed doors, I could still hear the bastards. I groaned aloud. Eli never made that much noise in bed, and I couldn't imagine him giving his new friend any reason to. The fucker was probably trying to make me jealous. He'd succeeded, but not for the reason he believed. Damn it, everyone in this house was having orgasms except me. Well, Curt the Bartender might not have been having any either, but still. Damn it, I was horny, they were getting laid, and—

Cold shower. Need a cold shower.

I threw off my clothes, got into the shower and tried not to think of all the times I'd thought about Angel and Dante in here.

Twenty-four hours to go. I'd made it this far; I could make it that far.

The cool water poured through my hair, over my shoulders, down my abs and onto my maddeningly erect cock. God, I was going to feel

like hell if I didn't do something about it, but would the guilt outlast the ache if I didn't?

I could. Right here, right now, and they'd never know.

No. No. No. They were my Doms, and they'd ordered me not to come until tomorrow night. I wouldn't be able to look them in the eye and pretend I'd obeyed, and if they knew I'd disobeyed, I could only imagine the new punishment they'd come up with.

Preemptively grimacing, I turned the shower all the way to cold. Icy water followed the same path as the tepid water before it, and I whispered every curse I could think of. I hated being cold, but it beat the alternative.

After a minute or two, it had numbed most of my skin and dulled the ache I'd intended for it to dull. I got out of the shower, dried off and went searching for the next distraction.

Finally, I put on some headphones and sat at my computer to get an early start on my taxes.

The next morning, I very carefully avoided Eli. Cleaning tack, fixing fences and working horses kept me out of the house until long after he and Curt the Bartender left. I didn't want him believing I was jealous that he was getting laid, but I was carrying around too much pent-up frustration to deal with smug gloating without hurting someone. He could assume all he wanted that I was jealous. I just hoped his new fuck buddy was thoroughly taken with him, because Eli was going to need a place to crash pretty soon.

By that evening, though, I barely even remembered I lived with anyone else, let alone the fact that he was doing his level best to give himself sex-induced laryngitis last night. All I could think of was getting cleaned up, getting in the car, and getting the hell over to Dante and Angel's place. I even spun my tires pulling out of the driveway. Hopefully none of my clients saw me, since they knew it irritated me when they did that.

Oh well. They could call me a hypocrite all they wanted. I was in a hurry tonight.

And my hurry paid off. I made it to my destination in record time, and with my nerve endings on fire with anticipation, I rang the doorbell.

Dante answered, greeting me with a light kiss. I didn't have a jacket this time—forgot to put one on for some reason, couldn't think why—so there was no need to worry about giving Angel a heart attack by hanging it incorrectly.

"Where's Angel?" I asked.

"Kitchen. Something to drink?" Dante gestured with the half-empty glass in his hand.

"No, I'm okay," I said.

"You sure?" He started toward the kitchen, nodding for me to follow him.

"I'm fine, don't worry."

In the kitchen, Angel was putting a bowl of food down for the cat. "Hey, Jordan. How's it going?"

Horny. Fucking horny. God, you guys are torturing me. I gulped. "Good, good."

"That's what we like to hear." He smiled, then went to the sink to wash his hands.

While Angel put away the cat food and Dante finished his drink, we made small talk, something I was certain they'd planned just to torment me a little longer. Even after the glass was empty and the cat food was out of sight, long after the bizarre Siamese-like cat had left, Dante and Angel leaned against the counter, and we shot the breeze like one of us wasn't dying to be paroled from five long days of complete chastity.

At one point, as if channeling my barely contained nervous energy, Angel's fingers drummed rapidly on the counter. Without even looking at him or pausing the conversation, Dante put his hand on Angel's shoulder. Angel released a long breath and his fingers slowed, slowed, slowed, stopped.

Of all the things I envied about them, that was in the top ten. With simple contact, Dante could settle Angel into stillness. The two of them probably didn't even know they were doing it. What I wouldn't have given to be with someone whose touch could calm me like that, or who calmed so quickly at the touch of my hand.

And if I could talk one of them into the touch of a hand, or a mouth, or—

You relentless, teasing bastards.

The conversation reached a natural pause, and the glance that passed between them sent my blood pressure through the roof, especially when Dante's chin dipped in the slightest of nods.

Angel came toward me, eyes narrowed. "So, did you make it through your punishment?"

Finally, thank God.

I gulped, his nearness pushing me up against the counter even though he was still an arm's length away from me when he stopped.

"Barely," I said.

He tilted his head. "Meaning?"

I licked my lips. "Meaning I think another day might have killed me."

Dante laughed. "But did you obey us for the entire five days?"

I nodded.

Angel smiled and moved a little closer, reaching up to caress my

cheek. “Good. And since missteps come with punishments, naturally, obedience comes with rewards.” He knocked the breath out of me with a gentle brush of his hand over my clothed erection. I could barely breathe as he unzipped my jeans and unbuckled my belt. Couldn’t breathe at all when his hand wrapped around my cock. Thought I’d pass out when he whispered, “You’ve earned this.”

He dropped to his knees right there on the kitchen floor, and I damn near came when his tongue swept around the head of my cock. *Not yet*, I told myself. *Please, God, not yet*.

As if Angel’s hand and mouth weren’t enough, Dante didn’t just sit back and watch. He slid his hand around one side of my neck and kissed the other. I whimpered as their mouths drove me fucking crazy, gripping the counter with one hand and Dante’s arm with the other.

Even with Angel on his knees at my feet, there was no denying who was in control here. I wanted to come so bad, and even with five days’ worth of maddening tension built up and ready to release at the drop of a hat, I held back.

“May I—” I choked on my own voice. “Please, may—”

“Yes, of course.” Dante kissed beneath my jaw. “Come for us, Jordan.”

My knees buckled and my eyes rolled back. Five days, two cold showers, and oh God, for the orgasm Angel gave me, it was all worth it.

Angel stopped. Dante raised his head. One kissed me. Then the other. My lips still tingled, my vision still blurred. Straightening my clothes with unsteady hands, I’d have gladly gone through a month of frustration in exchange for this.

“I told you.” Angel paused to lick his lips. “Do what we say. It’ll be worth it.”

I nodded. “You were right.”

“Of course I was.” He kissed me again. “And now that you’ve come once, we can *really* get started.” Without another word, he gestured for me to follow him out of the kitchen. I did, and fortunately, Dante kept his arm around my waist, because my knees hadn’t stopped shaking quite yet.

In the guest room, Angel faced me. “Strip.”

My heart pounded. No removing clothing piece by piece, no putting me on my knees first. Right down to business tonight. Hell, yeah.

Dante released me, and I did as ordered. While I undressed, Angel opened the chest of drawers and pulled out—

Holy fuck.

The black leather-wrapped handle was probably a foot long, give or take. Angel gripped one end. From the other end dangled a dozen

or so strips of leather, each about three-quarters of an inch wide. He raised it, then brought the tails down on his palm with a sharp *smack*.

I gulped.

"This," he said, holding it up, "is a flogger. Ever seen one?"

"Not up close and personal." I couldn't take my eyes off it. I'd certainly seen such things during my late-night online searches, and I'd salivated at the thought of being on the receiving end of those tails. When Angel hit his hand again, I licked my lips.

Dante chuckled. "I think he likes the idea."

Angel looked at me. "Do you, now?"

"Very much so." My voice barely rose above a hoarse whisper.

"Good." He grinned. "Get on your knees."

My knees went slack at his command rather than any conscious thought on my part. I knelt, automatically dropping my gaze to the floor.

They both approached. One ran his fingers through my hair.

"Look at us, Jordan," Dante whispered.

Shifting my gaze upward to them, I suppressed a shiver. Just this simple routine, these simple words and motions, and I was putty in their hands.

"As always," Angel said, "you're not allowed to come until we say otherwise."

I nodded. "Understood."

"Also," Dante said, "we're going to do things a little differently tonight."

I gulped. "You're flogging me, right?" *Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes*.

"That," Angel said with a slight nod, "and you'll be fucking Dante."

I blinked. "I…will?"

"Yes," Dante said. "But not yet." He turned to Angel and gestured at me. "Have fun."

"Oh, I will." Angel moistened his lips. To me, he said, "Turn around."

My heart pounded as I turned my back to him. I closed my eyes, holding my breath and bracing for the flogger. God, I'd wanted this for so long. *Yes, yes, yes.*

The first contact of leather to flesh was gentle and dull. No pain whatsoever. Another strike. Then another. Just warming my skin up, most likely, and I hoped and hoped he intended to make it hurt.

The whole time, in the back of my mind, I couldn't stop thinking about Angel's comment that I'd be fucking Dante. I was the submissive. Dante was my Dom. How would…what did…how the…

Smack. The tails hit harder this time. Still not enough to hurt, but

enough to get my attention. Harder. A little harder. Just a little more and that delicious sting would come, I knew it. It was there somewhere. *Come on, come on, please, Angel…*

Finally, some of the tails bit in just enough to wake up some pain receptors. Not quite a sting, not enough to warrant even the slightest flinch, but it was there. The vague burn of a scratched itch. Another strike, more pain-that-wasn't.

He stopped. I chewed my lip. *Please, Angel…*

"Get up," he said. "Dante, he's all yours."

Aggravation tightened my jaw while arousal made me shiver. Fuck Dante? Absolutely. Wasn't going to argue. But Angel had given me a taste, just the most fleeting taste, of the pain I craved, only to take it away.

"Is there a problem?" Angel asked.

My eyes flew open, and I realized I hadn't yet obeyed him. "No, sorry." I scrambled to my feet. I looked at Dante, waiting for his command.

"You're going to get on the bed behind me, and you're going to fuck me." He paused to pull off his shirt. The more he disrobed, the more real it became, especially as he went on. "You're going to fuck me however I tell you to. As hard or as gentle, as fast or as slow, as I say." He tossed his jeans and boxers aside. "No more, no less. Understood?"

Fucking my Dom? Submitting even while being in the physical position of power? *I can get my head around this. I know I can. I know I can.*

"Jordan?" The question was sharp. "Answer me."

"Yes." I cleared my throat. "Yes, I understand."

"Good." He gestured toward the bed. Pretending my knees and hands weren't shaking, I moved onto the bed. Dante handed me a condom.

I silently begged my hands to be steady, and to my surprise, they were. Well, until I had the condom on, anyway. At least I didn't need much manual dexterity at that point, because when Dante poured some lube on his hand and stroked it onto my cock, my hands shook so bad I'd have dropped the condom if it wasn't already on. I had to close my eyes and hold my breath just to keep myself in control. The very thought of being inside him had me so turned on, I couldn't see straight, and now he was touching me, putting lube on me, ready for me, *oh God, I am not ready for this*.

Dante released my cock. When he turned around, my pulse skyrocketed. Ready or not, we were doing this. I was doing this.

I knelt behind him, resting a hand on his hip as I guided myself to him. Uncertain, I glanced at Angel, and his subtle nod of approval sent

a rush of relief and arousal through me. Focusing on Dante again, I steadied myself and pressed against him, pushing in slowly. With every inch I gained, I watched, listened, and felt for any signs that I'd done anything wrong, and he gave me none.

Closing my eyes, I drew a few long, even breaths to keep myself in control. Jesus, he felt amazing. I hadn't realized how long it had been since I'd done this at all, let alone without being in a hurry. Slow, smooth strokes, in and out, just feeling him.

Then Dante rocked back slightly, and my hips immediately fell into step with his faster rhythm. When he slowed down, I slowed down. When he moved faster, I moved faster. It was surreal, being physically on top, knowing he was in total control. Surreal and so, *so* fucking hot.

Smack.

The sound startled me. When I followed the sound, my heart skipped. Angel had another flogger in his hand, stiffer than the other by the looks of it, and he'd hit it against his hand.

Smack.

Oh, fuck.

"Jordan," Dante said sharply. "I didn't tell you to slow down."

"S-sorry." I found my pace again, moving in time with him, falling into the rhythm he demanded. I tried to, anyway. Every time I managed to get in synch with Dante, Angel struck his palm with the flogger again and threw me off.

"What's wrong, Jordan?" Angel singsonged, hitting his palm again for emphasis. "Am I distracting you?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yes, you are."

"Good." *Smack.*

"Jordan." Dante's voice made me jump.

"Sorry," I whispered. Holding his hips, I forced myself to focus on everything he silently demanded. And watching us move together, watching myself thrusting into him, didn't do a damned thing to help me stay in control.

The air above my sweaty back cooled for a split second, and it drew my attention *just* before dozens of sharp stingers descended on my shoulder. My nerve endings flared with sweet, delicious pain. More stingers, this time on my other shoulder, and more pain.

"Oh, fuck…" The room spun around me. Every time Angel laid the flogger across my skin, more endorphins flooded my veins until my eyes rolled back and my entire body wanted to collapse.

Beneath me, Dante shifted, changing our cadence to a faster one. *Smack*. Slower now. *Smack*. Slower. *Smack*. Harder, faster, don't you dare stop, *smack*, faster, *smack*. My legs ached. My skin stung. I desperately wanted—needed—to come again, but held back. I wasn't

allowed, not yet, not yet, not yet.

But the pain and the endorphins and my cock inside Dante…

"Oh God," I heard myself moan.

"Think we should let him come?" Angel's voice sounded miles away.

"I don't know," Dante said, his voice taut, on the verge of a moan, "I rather like what he's doing."

"Please," I breathed. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. My whole body shook and my balls tightened with the threat of an orgasm, one I didn't know if I could hold back.

Dante rocked back against me. His body coaxed me into faster thrusts, every one of which chipped away at my ability to not come, not come, *fuck, you guys are going to kill me*.

Someone moaned, and it took a second to realize it hadn't been me.

Dante shuddered, moving a little faster, urging me to do the same. "Just like that," he whispered. "Oh God, Jordan, just like that."

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Dante let his head fall forward. His shoulders quivered, trembled, and my own shoulders burned, and I fucked him, and Angel flogged me, and Dante shuddered, and—

When Dante came, he released a throaty cry, and it was all I could do not to follow him right over that edge.

Then, from behind me, Angel whispered two simple words: "Come, Jordan."

I thrust all the way into Dante, and my balance was gone. I slumped over him, eyes screwed shut and lungs screaming for air to replace the breath my orgasm had forced out. Beneath me, Dante shook and moaned. Behind me, Angel must have set the flogger down, because gentle hands materialized on my shoulders.

Delirium kept hold of me for…a while. I knew Dante and Angel were there. I heard their voices, sensed their movement and my own.

At some point, I made it into bed between them. I'd pulled out of Dante, gotten rid of the condom, wiped some of the sweat off my tingling skin, and moved from wherever we'd been to here, but hell if I could remember. It was there somewhere in my brain; I just didn't care.

I was vaguely aware of Angel rubbing something on my back. Oil? Lotion? I didn't know.

Dante rested his arm on my shoulder, trailing a finger up and down my neck. "You okay?"

I nodded. "I thought you guys were going to kill me, though."

"Oh, come on, now," Angel said. "We wouldn't kill our shiny new plaything. We're just getting started with you."

“What about you?” I slurred. “You haven’t come yet.”

“I will.” Angel kissed the back of my shoulder. “For now, you can catch your breath. There’s plenty of time for me.”

Maybe he was an angel of mercy after all, because I definitely needed to catch my breath. Settling into the bed between them, I said to Dante, “Honestly, I never thought it was possible for a Dom to be receiving and still be ‘on top’, so to speak.”

Dante smiled, the corners of his blue eyes crinkling. “You just hadn’t met me, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Angel said, brushing his hair out of his face. “You just hadn’t met a cocky enough bastard to say, ‘watch me taking it up the ass and still being in charge.’”

I laughed. Dante tried to look stern, but failed as he always did when Angel batted his eyes.

“Seriously, though,” Dante said. “I just like the way it feels. Doesn’t mean I’m going to give up control.”

“And there’s nothing in the rules that says the pitcher’s always in charge,” Angel said. “Anyone who says that has never seen a female Domme at work.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said. “Makes sense, though.”

“Listen to the Angel of Wisdom,” Dante said with a grin. “Well, this time. Helps to take everything else he says with a grain of salt.”

“Dante,” Angel said in a stage whisper. “You’re not supposed to tell him that.”

“Why not?” Dante shrugged. “I doubt he believes you’re nearly as angelic as you appear.”

“Speaking of which, I never did ask.” I looked at Angel. “Where did your nickname really come from?”

“We had a sub who said we were like a devil and an angel,” he said.

“And because of my name,” Dante said. “He joked that the two of us were a Divine Comedy. Appropriate enough, since that’s where my name came from.”

“Really?” I stared at Dante. “Your parents actually named you for Dante Alighieri?”

He nodded. “My mom had a thing for the classics, and since I put her through hell…”

“Oh, that reminds me,” I said. “Speaking of putting people through hell…” I shot them each a playful glare.

“What?” Angel said.

“I have to know. About this whole thing with me not having an orgasm for five days,” I said. “You guys didn’t get anyone else in on it, did you?”

They glanced at each other, then back at me, brows furrowed.

“No,” Dante said. “What do you mean?”

I raised an eyebrow. “So neither of you had anything at all to do with my ex bringing another guy home last night?”

Angel snorted with laughter. “Are you serious?”

I nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Dante pressed his lips together but couldn’t keep a straight face. Angel made less of an effort to hide his amusement as he said, “So, what? He was having loud sex while you couldn’t do anything?”

“That’s exactly what he was doing,” I growled. “I don’t think he’s ever been that loud in his *life*.”

Angel lost it.

“I swear on everything that’s holy,” Dante said, unable or unwilling to contain his own laughter, “we had nothing to do with that.”

Angel wiped his eyes. “That would have been brilliant, though, don’t you think?”

“You guys really are evil,” I said, finally allowing myself to laugh too.

“We are indeed.” Angel took my hand and guided it beneath the covers. “And before you start getting too mouthy again, I think you still need to do something about *this*.”

He wrapped my fingers around his hard cock, and I shivered.

Chapter Thirteen

Dante

A few nights later, Angel led Jordan into the rec room we'd converted into a studio.

"Wow," Jordan said, checking out his surroundings. "I thought you guys just did this at your other studio."

"Usually, we do," Angel said. "But we tend to keep our more…" He trailed off, pursing his lips.

"We do our racier work here," I said.

"Oh?" Jordan raised an eyebrow. "You mean like that first time I posed for you?"

"Well, that was hardly racy by our standards," Angel said. "The photography, anyway."

"And it *was* kind of impromptu," Dante said.

"True." Jordan hooked his thumbs in his front pockets. "So this is where the more premeditated stuff happens, then."

"Precisely." Angel looked at him. "No qualms about getting in front of the camera again? Even if it's in a less than professional environment?"

"After what happened last time?" Jordan grinned. "None at all."

"That's the spirit," Angel said, chuckling. His expression turned serious. "Okay, so since we don't have to break the ice and feel you out this time, we can jump right in. Still, ground rules."

"For all intents and purposes, we're both your Doms, as always," I said. "But for the most part, I'll be giving directions to both of you as the photographer, while Angel will give you instructions as your Dom."

"And if Dante and I switch, which we most likely will, the same rules apply," Angel said. "The photographer's in charge of the shoot, the Dom is in charge of the sub."

"So basically," Jordan said, "I do whatever anyone tells me to do."

Angel grinned at me. "He's a fast learner, isn't he?"

"Very." To Jordan, I said, "Safe words still apply, same as always. If you decide you're not comfortable in front of the cameras anymore, or whatever, just say the word."

"I think I'll be okay," Jordan said. "But duly noted."

"You'll probably be fine," Angel said. "The safe words are there if you need them, though."

"Tell us the safe words again," I said.

"Red to stop," Jordan said. "Yellow to back off."

I nodded. "Good. Well, with that covered, shall we?"

They went to the center of the set, under the hot lights, while I

put my camera strap over my head. Then I knelt by the edge of the set and turned on the camera.

Jordan and Angel went through the usual motions: Undressing Jordan, putting him on his knees, Angel running his fingers through Jordan's hair. Watching through the viewfinder, I swore a million memory cards wouldn't have held all the images the two of them created. Light and shadow playing in the groove of Jordan's spine, all the way up the curve of his back to his broad shoulders. Coppery highlights appearing in his hair between Angel's fingers as Jordan sucked Angel's cock. Jordan gazing up at Angel like he'd do anything in the world if Angel asked; Angel gazing down like Jordan could do no wrong.

The band of ink around Angel's wrist was like a curving, winding arrow drawing attention straight to Jordan's eyes, which alternated between focusing upward at Angel and closing at the same time a quiet growl of ecstasy came from one of the two men. Tension rippled across Jordan's shoulders. Angel's hair fell into his eyes as he tilted his head back and swore.

All the while, they paid no attention to me. For all I knew, they'd forgotten I was here at all in spite of the constant *snap-snap-snap* of the camera shutter and my occasional footsteps. And they may very well have. Jordan was completely wrapped up in stroking and sucking Angel's cock. I doubted Angel was aware of much of anything besides Jordan's talented hand and mouth.

I moved to another vantage point and knelt again, ignoring how increasingly difficult that was with a hard-on that didn't *want* to be ignored. Instead, I focused on them, what they did and how sexy they were.

It was easy to create an erotic image with two gorgeous men fooling around. The art was in finding everything that was easy to overlook. The details no one noticed in porn magazines and a lot of erotic art because they were too drawn to the cocks, breasts, penetration and money shots.

What I wanted were the hairs standing on end on the back of Angel's arm while he stroked Jordan's hair. Jordan's hand on Angel's hip. Angel focused on Jordan, brow furrowed and lips parted; no one who saw the image would hear Angel's whispered curses, but if I caught the image like I thought I did, the feeling would be unmistakable.

Angel's gaze shifted toward me, looking through his lashes and down the lens, right into my eyes. We could live to be a hundred and fifty years old, and that look would still give me goose bumps every time. I took the picture, then lowered the camera, and for a heartbeat, we exchanged glances without the filter of glass and plastic in

between.

The moment passed. I raised the camera; Angel dropped his gaze.

Kneeling was getting progressively less comfortable, and more than once I wished I'd undressed before we'd started. Oh well, too late now. All I could do was concentrate on them, knowing I'd get my chance to take care of this hard-on very soon.

I zoomed in on Jordan's face. I wasn't after a shot of him sucking Angel's cock per se. It made a hot image, of course, but what I wanted was—

There it was.

Snap.

That upward flick of his eyes. Lust, reverence, total submission, all in a glance.

"Jesus, that's perfect," Angel whispered.

Snap. Angel's hand over Jordan's on his hip.

"Just like that…fuck…"

Snap. Fingers in Jordan's hair.

"Oh, fuck, you're…you're gonna make me…"

Snap. Angel's furrowed brow above heavy-lidded eyes.

"Oh…God…Jordan…"

Snap. The low groan he released couldn't be captured in a static, silent image, but I hoped I'd caught that perfect moment when he let go: throwing his head back, his lips apart just as his eyes flew open. Even if by chance the camera hadn't caught it, I did, and it was fucking beautiful.

I moistened my dry lips. "Angel, look at me."

Only his eyes moved, and he stared right down the camera lens, straight into me.

Snap. Shiver. Exhale.

He grinned. "Your turn."

I lowered the camera and stood. While Angel got his camera out of its case, I got out of my clothes. To Jordan, I said, "Feel like getting fucked?"

His posture straightened. The tip of his tongue swept across his lower lip, and he nodded. "Absolutely."

"Good." I pulled a condom out of my pocket and dropped my jeans on top of the rest of my clothes.

On my way past Angel, I touched his arm and whispered, "I would suggest getting every shot you can as quickly as you can."

He looked at me. "Oh?"

"Let's just say," I said with a grin, "I don't expect this to be a very long session."

Angel slid his hand over my erection and squeezed hard enough to make me gasp. Our lips nearly touched as he said, "Duly noted."

I kissed him lightly, then went onto the set, where Jordan waited on his knees. He met my eyes and licked his lips. I shivered; I wasn't going to last long. No way in hell. Just watching Jordan tear the condom wrapper was enough to nearly make me come unglued. When he put it on me, I had to hold my breath. *Jesus, Jordan, if you only knew how much you turned me on*.

Once the condom was on, I gestured for him to stand.

"There's a chair over by the closet." I nodded in its direction while I put some lube on my cock. "Bring it here."

Jordan obeyed, stepping off the set and returning with the chair I'd asked for. I placed it in the middle of the set, between us and Angel, and gestured toward it.

"Put your hands on the back of it."

Jordan swallowed hard. As ordered, he put his hands on the chair's back, which required him to lean over just enough to put him in the perfect position. A shudder ran through him as I slid a lubricated finger into him. I dug my teeth into my lip, every breath he took taking *my* breath away as I moved my finger in and out of him.

"Like that?" I asked.

"Yes," he whispered, his shoulders tensing, relaxing, tensing again.

I couldn't take anymore. He was plenty ready for me, as he always was, so I withdrew my finger and guided my cock to him. Holding my breath, I pushed in slowly, and before I was all the way inside him, my vision blurred and my spine tingled.

Oh, fuck, this isn't *going to take long at all*.

I closed my eyes, biting my lip again as I moved deeper inside him. Slow, steady strokes, as much to tease him as to keep myself in control. Then, because I couldn't help myself, faster. Fuck it, I couldn't hold back when he felt this good.

Gritting my teeth and holding on to his hips for support and dear life, I fucked him *hard*.

"Now *that* is hot," Angel said.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

I kissed Jordan's neck, breathing in his scent, the heat of his skin, *him*. The chair creaked. Jordan moaned. His body shook. So did mine. Every snap of the shutter drove me insane along with every thrust I took, every tremor. Oh, fucking hell, I was inside Jordan, Angel was watching, this was perfect, perfect, fucking perfect.

Just when I couldn't hold back anymore, I whispered, "Come, Jordan."

In the same heartbeat, we both let go. I slumped over him, gasping for breath. My cock pulsed inside him, and every aftershock crackled up the length of my spine.

When it finally subsided and my vision cleared, I pulled out. Jordan's knees buckled, and he gripped the chair for balance.

I squeezed his shoulder. "You all right?"

He nodded. "Just…out of breath."

"Take a minute and catch your breath, then." I kissed the back of his neck, just below the sweaty ends of his hair. Pushing myself up, I added, "Because you're not done yet."

He looked at me over his shoulder, eyebrows arching upward.

I grinned and flicked my eyes toward Angel. Jordan followed my gaze, and the muscles in his neck tensed under my hand when Angel smacked his own palm with the tails of a leather flogger.

I leaned in and whispered in his ear, "Think you can handle a beating?"

Jordan shivered. Swallowed. Nodded.

"Good." I kissed the side of his neck. "Because I want to watch him flog you."

Another shiver.

I kissed his neck again, then took a step back. I turned to Angel. "He's all yours. Give me a minute to get cleaned up, and I'll be back with the camera."

"I still have to warm him up anyway." Angel hit his palm again. "Take your time."

I left him to get Jordan's skin warmed up, and by the time I returned, Jordan was on his knees. Angel spent a few minutes with the softer flogger before switching to a stiffer one that would give Jordan the sting he so loved.

He looked at me. "Ready?"

I raised the camera. "When you are."

The mischievousness in those beautiful blue eyes gave me pleasant chills. "I'm always ready for this," Angel said. "You know that."

I watched through the viewfinder, my mouth watering as Angel raised the flogger. He brought it down on Jordan's shoulders with a satisfying *smack*, and Jordan grunted. His expression was somewhere between a wince and total bliss, but each time Angel hit him, the scales tipped further and further in favor of the latter.

A few times, I forgot I even had a camera in my hand. Watching the two of them, I had to remind myself I was supposed to be photographing them. And what a beautiful subject to photograph.

Snap. Tails frozen in midair.

Snap. Leather tails splayed across Jordan's shoulder.

Snap. The cocktail of pain and pleasure furrowing Jordan's brow and pulling his lips into a grimace.

Eyes closed, Jordan moaned and wavered a little. He leaned forward on his hands, and his elbows and shoulders shook with the

herculean effort of keeping himself upright. His skin was drenched in sweat, and he was deep in subspace now. On his knees with some post-orgasmic bliss and a rush of endorphins, he must have been in heaven.

After a while, though, Angel set the flogger down. “I think he’s had about enough,” he said to me as he knelt beside Jordan. I didn’t argue. The last thing we needed to do was push Jordan too far, so I picked up one of the towels we’d made sure to keep handy and tossed it to Angel. He wrapped it around Jordan’s shoulders and spoke so softly to him I couldn’t understand what he said.

Once I’d put my camera aside and clicked off some of the lights, I joined them.

“Why don’t you take him in the bedroom?” Angel said to me as he rubbed Jordan’s neck. “I’ll clean up in here and meet you guys in there.”

“Will do.” To Jordan, I said, “You okay to stand?”

He nodded. Angel and I held his arms while he rose. Once he was steady on his feet, I kept my arm around his waist and guided him down the hall to our bedroom. I helped him get into bed, then joined him and pulled the covers over us. His skin was still hot, but I didn’t want to take a chance on him getting cold when the endorphins wore off.

“Water?” I asked.

“Please.”

As we always did, Angel and I had left a couple of water bottles in here before we’d gotten started. I gave one to Jordan and drank heavily from the other. After a moment, he handed back the mostly empty bottle, and I set both of them aside.

Propping myself up on one arm, I caressed his face. “You okay?”

“Mm-hmm.” He closed his eyes and exhaled.

“Are you hot? Cold?”

“No, this is fine.”

I kissed him gently. “Lay on your stomach. You need some lotion on those welts.”

He turned over and rested his head on the pillow, folding his arms beneath it. I uncapped the lotion and poured some into my hand, rubbed my hands together to warm it, then carefully rubbed it onto his back. His skin wasn’t too raw, but it was definitely pink from the flogger.

“This okay?” I asked.

“Feels good,” he slurred.

“Just tell me if it stings anywhere.”

“Mm-hmm.” His eyes were closed, and his breathing slowed. Even when I stopped rubbing his back, he didn’t move.

Angel came in and sat beside us. He put his hand on Jordan's shoulder. "Not falling asleep on us, are you?"

Jordan murmured something resembling a negative.

"Don't listen to him," I said. "If you need to sleep, sleep. We're not going anywhere."

"Of course we're not." Angel slid his hand up the middle of Jordan's back. "He's in *our* bed."

Jordan's back rose with the effort of a quiet laugh.

"So that wasn't too much for you?" I asked.

"Not at all," Jordan said.

"Good."

Angel played with Jordan's hair. "Think you might want to do it again?"

"Definitely."

"Excellent," Angel said. "You have five minutes."

Jordan raised his head and gave Angel a playful glare. Then he dropped his head back onto his arms.

Angel leaned down to kiss Jordan's cheek. Jordan probably didn't even feel it, because in no time flat, he'd drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Angel

"Dante got hung up with a client." I stood aside to let Jordan in the house a week or two after that photo shoot. "He was just getting back to the studio when I left, so he'll be along pretty soon."

"So I'm just stuck with you, then?" He took off his jacket. "How *ever* will I cope?"

"Only one way you can cope." I held out my hand for his jacket. "By doing whatever I tell you to."

"I'm game for that." He handed me his coat, and I hung it beside the door.

"Of course you are." I winked, then led him into the living room. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Damn right."

In the living room, my cat had made herself at home in the middle of the couch. It mystified me how a cat that small could expand to take up so much space, but she took up the entire center cushion, with her toes and tail creeping onto the other two.

"Baby, you have to move." I picked her up. "Sorry, kiddo."

Jordan laughed. "Glad I'm not the only one who babies animals."

My cheeks burned as I set Jade on the recliner. "Definitely guilty." I joined Jordan on the couch. "She's pretty much our kid. Well, mine. She and Dante don't get along that well. Still, she's as close as we'll ever get to a kid."

"You guys ever thought about adopting kids or anything?"

"Nah. Neither of us has ever had much of a desire to be a parent, and we're both so damned busy…" I shrugged. "That, and we tend to travel to places where I wouldn't want to take a kid."

"I thought you didn't go to all those crazy places anymore, now that you're not going for assignments."

"Oh, we still do." I smiled. "We just go for fun, now." I gestured at Jade. "And unlike kids, we can leave her alone for a few weeks at a time as long as someone drops in to check on her every few days."

"She doesn't mind?" He raised an eyebrow at her as if he expected her to interject a comment or two. I wondered if he was as surprised as I was when she didn't.

"She doesn't *like* it," I said. "And she usually cold-shoulders me for a day or two when we get home, but she doesn't mind being by herself." I looked at her, then back at him. "So what about you? Ever thought about the whole kid thing?"

"No," he said. "I've already gotten a taste of parenting. That's enough for me."

"Really?"

He nodded. "I'm eight and ten years older than my siblings, and since I was an adult when our parents died, I took legal guardianship of Jenny and Jeremy until they were eighteen."

"Wow, that must have been rough."

"It was challenging. Nothing quite like going from a twenty-something kid to keeping after a couple of teenagers, making sure they get their homework done, all of that shit."

"Jesus."

"Tell me about it." He shifted, leaning on his elbow on the armrest. "It wasn't too bad, but it made me think twice about ever volunteering for it again."

"So, if you don't mind my asking," I said, "what happened to your parents?"

"Car accident." He exhaled. "On the way back from the regional championships one year. I was driving the semi with the horses; they were in the RV." He took a breath. "Interstate, logging truck, brake failure. Do the math."

I grimaced. "Sorry to hear it."

Jordan shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

"Still, I can't even imagine. Especially having to take on the care of your siblings on top of it all."

"Yeah, it was weird, I'll tell you that." He exhaled, his eyes losing focus. "Signing report cards in between taking my own classes and trying to keep the farm running. Going to parent-teacher conferences with my own teachers from a few years before." He said nothing for a moment, then shook himself back to life and met my eyes again. "I finally dropped out of college because I just couldn't keep up with everything."

"Seems like you've done pretty well with the farm, though."

"Yeah, it's done okay. It's what I've always wanted to do anyway, so it worked out. And, if there was a silver lining to the whole thing, my siblings and I are extra close now. We weren't as close before since I was so much older, but we are now."

"That's why you walked your sister down the aisle?"

He nodded, smiling. "She told me when she was sixteen that she'd have me walk her down the aisle when she eventually got married, and when the time came, she did."

"That really is great you and your siblings are so close," I said. "I'd love to be that close to mine, but…" I trailed off, shrugging.

"Well, I could think of better bonding experiences for siblings, believe me."

"I'm sure." I paused. "While I'm prying and getting too personal, I'm curious about something about your sister's wedding. And you

don't have to answer."

He cocked his head, silently bidding me to continue.

"If you and Eli are done, why was he there with you?"

Jordan groaned and rolled his eyes. "For the same reason my sister decided to take her husband's name even though she would've preferred not to."

"And that is?"

"To keep the peace." He sighed. "Eli and my brother-in-law are good friends. That's how Jenny met Paul, actually. So, one way or the other, Eli was going to the wedding."

"Amazing the things we do just to avoid conflict," I muttered.

"Oh? The voice of experience?"

"God, yes." I scratched the back of my neck and blew out a breath. "We've been invited to about thirty-seven million weddings in the last twelve years, besides the ones we've been hired to photograph, and I can't tell you how many times a bride or groom has had 'that conversation' with us."

"That conversation?"

"Yeah, you know." I cleared my throat and adopted a phony, extra masculine voice. "Could you guys just, you know, don't act like you're together?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ." Jordan shook his head. "Fuck, yes, I've had that conversation a few times."

"Annoying as hell, isn't it?"

"Very much so." He chuckled. "And then I have to go to my sister's wedding and damn near pretend Eli and I *were* together just to avoid conflict."

"Can't win, can we?"

"Nope."

"And don't you love the ones where it's okay if you're 'together', just don't 'do anything'." I rolled my eyes. "What do they think we're going to do? Fuck over the buffet table or interrupt the bouquet toss with a blowjob?"

Jordan laughed aloud. "Oh, man, I'd pay to see that."

"Yeah, me too." I grinned. "People would probably shit themselves if we asked to bring our third with us."

"Oh God, I can only imagine." He paused. "So, I've never been with someone as long as you two have been together. How *do* you handle that kind of thing now? Just don't go to weddings and stuff if they tell you to pretend you're just friends?"

"Depends on who's asking and why." I shifted a little, draping my arm along the back of the couch. "If it's a close friend who happens to know her father will go postal if he so much as hears the word 'gay', then we'll go and respect her request. If it's just someone who's

embarrassed to have a couple of gay guys at their wedding? Obviously we're not close enough to bother, so we decline the invite."

"Makes sense," Jordan said with a nod. "You guys ever catch hell from clients who catch on that you're gay?"

"Sometimes, but we usually just ignore it unless they get outwardly hostile." I chuckled. "We had one guy, years ago. Brother of the bride, absolutely livid that there were 'damned queers' documenting his sister's wedding for posterity." The chuckle turned to a snicker. "About three years later, he showed up asking us to photograph his commitment ceremony."

Jordan's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. Guess a lot can change in a few years."

"Isn't that the truth." He laughed and shook his head.

"Oh, and speaking of photos, I almost forgot." I leaned forward to get my laptop off the coffee table. "We finished working on the photos from that last shoot. I assume you want to see them?"

"Hell yeah, I do." He scooted a little closer while I pulled up the folder containing his pictures. Once I'd opened it and set it to the preview window, I handed the computer to him. He rested it on his lap, and I put my arm around his shoulders.

Jordan flipped through the images, pausing on each for anywhere from a few seconds to the better part of a minute.

Even after all these years, Dante's work still blew me away. We prided ourselves on making the most erotic photos we could while showing as little as possible. Not out of prudishness, of course. We just liked the suggestiveness of understated photos. The mental images created by what *wasn't* in the frame as well as what was. There could've been a million reasons why my lips were apart and my head was thrown back. The drop of sweat suspended on the damp ends of Jordan's hair could have been from heat, from exertion, even from nerves.

Sure, Dante had made sure to get a shot of Jordan's hand around my cock in mid-stroke, but the more striking image was the other hand on my leg, holding on as much for contact as balance. Or my hand in his hair, my fingers and forearm just tense enough to suggest I was doing more than simply stroking.

Jordan stared at one photo for a long time without saying a word. It was a simple image: his bare knees in front of my booted feet. No one could have known by looking at it if he was sucking my cock just then, or if he was waiting for my next command, or if one of us was speaking. What happened outside the frame was anyone's guess, but the implication was clear. Nothing but beautiful submission.

I didn't blame him for stopping on that one. It was easily one of my favorites in the entire batch.

After a few minutes, he clicked to the next photo.

Click. Click. Click.

He stopped again. It was just a simple, straight-on shot of his face and bare shoulders. He clicked back to the one before, then forward, then back. Cocked his head a little. Clicked forward again, and back.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

Brow still furrowed, he shook his head. "No, I'm just…"

"Hmm?"

He wet his lips and gestured at the image on the screen. "There's, I can't…" He paused. "Just trying to figure out exactly what it is about some pictures, like this one, that catch my eye more than others." He clicked back to the photo, which was similar. "But this one doesn't strike me quite the same."

"Oh, right, that's because of the composition. We both swear by the rule of thirds, which is used in that shot."

"The what?"

"The rule of thirds." I gestured at the photo. "It's a principle of composition. You imagine the frame divided into horizontal and vertical thirds, and make the points of interest line up with the intersecting lines."

Jordan stared at the image.

"Here, check this out." I shifted the computer over to my lap and opened up my photo-editing software. I pulled up the picture that had caught his eye, saved it as a copy, and cropped the photo so his face was dead center rather than off to the left. Then I turned the screen toward him. "See how it isn't as dramatic and eye-catching now?"

He nodded. "Okay, I see it now."

I set the laptop on the coffee table. "It's just something that creates a more interesting composition. Adds tension, points of interest, that kind of thing."

"Obviously it works."

"Well, it's not set in stone, and we don't always follow it, as you saw, but it's a good rule of thumb."

"Rules are meant to be broken sometimes, though, right?"

"Of course." I sat back and absently draped my arm around him, not even realizing I'd done it until my palm rested lightly on his shoulder now. My hands were always drawn to Jordan. Had been since the first time he'd gone to his knees at my feet. The memory of my fingers running through his hair for the first time had them curling against his shoulder, tracing a seam of his shirt that insisted on remaining between my skin and his.

Odd, I thought. Dante was definitely the more tactile of the two of us. Always a hand on me or whatever sub we were with at a given time. Not that I had an aversion to physical contact, I just didn't seek

it out the way he did.

Oh, hell, what was there to analyze? I liked touching Jordan. Who *wouldn't*? So my fingers continued their little back-and-forth dance along that seam while his body heat warmed the length of my arm, and I pretended that just that gentle contact didn't already have me shifting to try to get comfortable.

"So how did he get hung up while you managed to make a break for it?" he asked.

"Wasn't my client. Actually, I'd have stuck around and helped if I'd known what was going on, but Dante didn't call me until I was almost home." I trailed my fingers up the back of his neck. "But it worked out, because that meant one of us was here to—"

My cat flew up onto the couch, startling both of us. She glared at Jordan. If she could have, she'd probably have scowled and demanded to know just what the fuck he thought he was doing in her spot. But then he scratched her back, right above her tail, and though she made an obvious effort not to like it, she caved in and arched her back. Then the purring started, and he had her wrapped around his finger.

"She doesn't usually like someone sitting in her place." I said. "Looks like she'll let it go this time."

Jordan chuckled, still scratching her. "Oh, I don't think she minds too much."

"No, apparently not." I reached across my own lap to pet her, telling myself several times that it wasn't just an excuse to move a *little* closer to Jordan.

Of course it wasn't. Which is why he didn't notice. Or turn his head. Or meet my eyes while a playful grin worked its way across his lips.

Just like I wasn't thinking about how much I'd been craving his kiss all damned day.

My mouth watered. I leaned in a little closer, and he mirrored me, letting me decide if a move was made and when. Dante would be along soon. There was no harm in just getting things started.

Just getting things started. Yeah, right. If I kissed him now, that would be it. Cat shoved off the couch, arms around each other, clothes landing where they fell. I wanted to wait until Dante got home, but I was horny, and Jordan's mouth was so, *so* tempting, and—

"*Fuck*." Jordan jumped back, sucking in a sharp hiss of breath.

"What? What?"

The telltale pop of a claw coming out of denim answered my question. Jade purred extra loudly, narrowing her eyes and kneading Jordan's thigh.

"You little shit," I said.

"She's okay." Jordan laughed, scratching behind her ears. "She

just startled me."

Jade, looking like the smug little mood killer she was, flopped down on Jordan's lap.

"Attention whore," I muttered.

"They always are."

"Well, she gets no shortage of attention, so it won't kill her if she doesn't get any right now." Careful to make sure she didn't claw him again, I picked her up off Jordan's lap and set her on the floor. "Sorry, baby, you're going to have to find someplace else to sleep."

"Aww, but she looked so comfortable."

"She was." I sat up and put my arm around his shoulders again. "But she was in the way." Touching his face with my free hand, I kissed him. Jordan put his arms around me, and as the kiss deepened and lingered, he sank against me. I slid my fingers into his hair, then pulled his head back just hard enough to make him grunt. When I kissed his neck, he moaned and held on to my shirt.

"Shouldn't we wait for Dante?" he whispered, making absolutely no effort to pull away.

"Of course not." I put my hand on his inner thigh and slowly drew it upward. "This way you'll be good and warmed up when he gets home."

"Don't think that'll…that'll be an issue."

When my hand made it to his crotch, he wasn't kidding. I traced the outline of his cock with my fingertips, and my own erection made it almost impossible to sit comfortably like this.

I didn't care, though, because I'd found Jordan's mouth again. I slid the tip of my tongue under his, and he groaned softly into my kiss. I inhaled deeply through my nose and pulled him closer. Just the musky, masculine scent of him drove me insane. Combined with the taste of his kiss and the thick ridge beneath my hand and his jeans, I wanted him. Badly. I had to have him.

Dante and I had so many plans for tonight. Pushing some limits, teasing his senses, making him beg and plead for release. Maybe some more pain, maybe some bondage, but those plans would have to wait. Sitting here this way, making out on my couch like a couple of desperate teenagers, all I wanted to do was fuck him. Put him on his knees, hold on to his hips and *fuck him*.

I broke the kiss and tilted my head back, and Jordan immediately went for my neck. Closing my eyes, I exhaled hard as his lips found every sensitive place from my jaw to my collarbone.

"Your mouth is fucking amazing," I breathed.

"Thank you," he murmured, and gently nipped just above my collar. He dragged his lip across my skin, just the way I did to his lower lip whenever I kissed him, and I shivered. Every nerve ending in

my body tingled into hyperawareness and searched for his lips, his fingers, any kind of contact, even if it was just the warmth of an *almost*-touch.

"Mmm, just like that," I whispered as he kissed his way up to my ear. He continued along my jaw, and when he raised his head, I kissed him. I gripped his hair and kissed him desperately, almost savagely, and the moan against my lips made me that much harder. Fuck, I wanted him.

My phone suddenly came to life with Dante's favorite song.

"Shit, that's Dante."

Jordan sat up to let me reach for my Bluetooth on the coffee table.

"Hopefully he's not running late." I clicked on the headset. "Hey."

"Hey, sorry about that," Dante said. "I'm on my way home now."

"About fucking time." I chuckled and put my hand on Jordan's leg. "You just leaving the studio?"

"No, I had to stop for gas. I'm about ten minutes out."

"Pity." I glanced at Jordan and winked. "Guess Jordan's stuck with me until you get here."

Dante laughed. "You're keeping him entertained, aren't you?"

A grin tugged at my lips. "I suppose I should do that, shouldn't I?"

"Well, then, I should let you go."

"No, you don't need to do that." I licked my lips. Jordan raised an eyebrow.

"What?" Dante asked. "Why not?"

"You using your hands-free?"

"Of course."

"Good. So am I." I looked at Jordan, then pointed at the floor in front of my feet. He didn't hesitate and immediately went to his knees where I'd indicated. To Dante, I said, "That means you can still talk while you're driving, right?"

"Of course I—" He paused. "Why?"

"No reason." I unzipped my jeans. Jordan gulped. I gave him a nod and said to Dante, "No reason at—oh, *Jesus*."

"Angel, what are you doing?"

"Oh, it's not what *I'm* doing." I stroked Jordan's hair. He started slow, God bless him, teasing me with his lips and tongue instead of giving me everything he had.

"Angel…"

"Don't worry," I whispered, barely finding my voice as Jordan took my cock deeper into his mouth. "Just means we'll both be warmed up for you when—" My voice caught. "Easy, Jordan. I don't want you to make me come yet."

"You're fucking evil," Dante growled.

"*I'm* evil?" I closed my eyes and groaned. "Jesus, Dante, you know

that thing he does with his tongue? That—"

As if for emphasis, Jordan did it again.

"Oh God…"

"Fuck, Angel…"

"I would, but then he'd have to stop with his mouth." I fought to find my breath. "And I am *not* stopping him."

Dante said nothing for a second. Then, "You're not joking, are you? Is he… Angel, is he really…"

"*Ooh*, yeah he is."

"Fuck. That's…oh, fuck, Angel…"

I moaned, my back lifting off the couch. "Dante, you…you need…"

"What?" He sounded almost as breathless as I was.

"Drive. Faster."

"Oh, God…" His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, and though I couldn't be sure, I swore the engine crescendoed in the background. In a low growl, Dante said, "Tell me what he's doing."

I looked down at Jordan, struggling to focus my eyes and find the words. "That thing he does," I whispered, pausing to lick my dry lips. "With both hands at the same time."

"Tell me. Details, Angel. Come on."

I licked my lips again. Right then, Jordan met my eyes, and the need for release inched toward unbearable. The ability to speak? Gone. I grasped his hair and moaned.

"Angel," Dante whispered, and he sounded as breathless as I was. "Please…"

I forced some air into my lungs and willed myself to remember how to speak. "Both hands, up and down, one…twisting a little…" The more I described it, the more Jordan did it. I groaned, closing my eyes and letting my head fall back. "Fuck, Jordan, that's amazing."

"You're not going to come before I get there, are you?" Dante said.

"Depends." I took a breath. "How much longer are you going to be?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can," he said quickly.

"No promises, though," I said. "Because…oh God, oh God…"

"What?" In my mind's eye, Dante white-knuckled the steering wheel and put the pedal to the floor. "What? Tell me."

"He's…fuck…" I looked down at Jordan, but my eyes were watering too much to focus, so I closed them again. "God damn it, Jordan, do you even *have* a gag reflex?"

A warm huff of breath implied a quiet laugh, and both that exhalation and the subtle vibration of his voice made me even dizzier.

I dug my teeth into my lip, screwing my eyes shut and forcing

myself not to come. I didn't need permission to come—Dante's or Jordan's—but I didn't want to let go until Dante was here. He heard what we were doing, knew what Jordan was doing to my cock with that incredible fucking mouth, but I wanted him to see. I wanted him to see my fingers in Jordan's hair, his head rising and falling rhythmically over my lap, and I wanted him to see my face the instant I let go, because I knew how much that would drive him insane.

The faint rumble of the garage door opening almost set me off. He was here. Dante was here. He was here, so I didn't have to hold out much longer.

"I'll be in the house in a second," he said, and the line went dead.

I didn't bother taking off my Bluetooth. I just kept my hand in Jordan's hair and closed my eyes, digging my teeth into my lip as his tongue swirled around the head of my cock this way, then that way, then this way again.

Down the hall, a door opened, and Jordan's rhythm faltered just enough to hint that he'd heard it. I gently grasped his hair. *God, don't stop, don't you dare fucking stop and look when he walks into the room*.

"Oh my God." Dante's voice, crystal clear without the static of the cellular line, raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I opened my eyes, blinking until he came into focus.

He was still for a moment. From the hallway, he just watched, jaw slack and eyes wide. Then his eyes met mine, and he was on the move again.

"This is even hotter than I pictured it," he growled, dropping onto the couch beside me. Our mouths came together in a passionate, breathless kiss. It only took a few seconds before I surrendered to both his mouth and Jordan's, and gave in to that orgasm that had been closing in on me. The world went white, and the universe concentrated itself into every pulse and shudder and *oh, my God* that surged through me.

As my orgasm subsided, Jordan released me, and I could finally catch my breath. Then, before I'd even had a chance to fix my clothes, Dante gasped. We both looked down, and Jordan met his eyes, then mine, while he unzipped Dante's pants.

He stopped suddenly. His hands froze and his spine straightened, as if he thought he'd done something wrong. He cleared his throat. "I —may I?"

Dante nodded, and Jordan's posture relaxed. He went back to undoing the zipper and buckle, and I could barely breathe as Jordan went down on Dante.

"Holy shit…" Dante groaned, resting his head on the back of the couch and closing his eyes. I slid my hand under his shirt. His abs contracted beneath my fingertips, and when I teased his nipple, he

gasped and arched his back. My own skin tingled from everything Jordan had done to me, and watching him do it to Dante made me shiver.

I kissed Dante's neck, and between Jordan's mouth and mine, he squirmed and moaned. His skin was hot, his pulse racing against my lips, and every time he shivered, my own heart beat faster. I knew all too well what he felt, my nerve endings still tingling from the very same thing: the way Jordan's tongue found every sensitive place, the way he alternated between deep-throating and just teasing, even the warmth of his breath on skin. Jordan was born to suck cock, I was sure of it.

"Oh…fuck…" Dante's entire body stiffened. His breath caught, his back arched, and with a breathless moan, he came. Jordan kept going until Dante whispered for him to stop. He sat back on his heels while Dante took a few slow, deep breaths.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered. "Your mouth is amazing, Jordan."

Jordan chuckled, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "I try."

Dante fixed his clothes, and we moved far enough apart to let Jordan join us on the couch. Before Jordan had even settled between us, Dante grabbed the back of his neck and kissed him deeply. I put my hand over the front of Jordan's jeans, biting my lip when he shuddered against Dante. I leaned in and kissed Jordan's neck, and Dante's hand brushed mine over Jordan's cock.

"We have plenty left for you tonight," I said against the goose bumps beneath the ends of Jordan's hair. "And since we've both already come once, do you know what that means?"

He broke away from Dante's kiss just enough to murmur, "Hmm?"

"It means," Dante said, his lips barely leaving Jordan's, "that we'll both last that much longer when we put you on your knees and fuck you."

Jordan shivered.

Chapter Fifteen

Dante

What I was thinking when I agreed to take a riding lesson from Jordan, I had no idea. But I'd agreed to it, and now I was parked in front of his barn, pretending the thought of getting on a horse didn't give me vertigo. I must have seemed like a complete wimp to him and Angel, being so intimidated by anything on four legs. Dogs, I'd had a bad experience. Horses? So far, no bad experiences, but they were huge. And fast. And had a tendency to freak the fuck out if something startled them.

Oh, just do it, Dante.

Rolling my eyes at my own cowardice, I got out of the car and went into the barn. I found Jordan in a stall with a small black horse that was loosely tied and half asleep. Jordan looked up from fastening the saddle in place and smiled.

"Hey," he said. "Just about ready."

"Don't rush on account of me."

"Not rushing, don't worry."

I gestured at the horse. "So this is the beast I'll be riding today?"

Jordan laughed. "Beast? Oh, come on, now." He patted the horse's rump, a tiny cloud of dust flying up around his hand. "This is Nova. She's about the most docile creature I own."

"That's encouraging." I eyed her warily. I was really going to do this? Get on the back of a horse?

Jordan opened the stall door but didn't come out. "Come on in."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes. Get in here." He winked. I hesitated, then stepped into the stall. As I did, he leaned out the door, glancing up the aisle, then down, then up again. "We won't stay in here long." He turned to me, a hint of color emphasizing the sheepish expression. "I was just hoping for a kiss."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" I touched his face and kissed him gently, and for about three seconds, forgot all about the large animal standing next to us. Then she fidgeted, and I broke the kiss to cast her an uncertain glance.

"They really intimidate you, don't they?" he asked, his voice playful, but not condescending.

I shrugged. "Yeah. Just a city kid, not used to being around animals, I guess."

"How the hell did you and Angel travel to all those exotic places without riding once in a while?"

"By very carefully choosing places that didn't require it." I

chuckled. “You should have seen me eyeballing the yaks when we were in the Himalayas.”

He smiled and held out his hand, beckoning. “Give me your hand.”

After a moment’s hesitation, I did as he asked. He gently closed his fingers around my wrist, and drew my hand closer to the horse.

Nova sniffed my hand. Her whiskers tickled my palm, and when she ran her lip back and forth across my fingers, presumably searching for a treat, I resisted the urge to jerk my hand back. If Jordan wasn’t concerned about her biting me, I told myself, then there was probably nothing to worry about. Still, having my hand that close to teeth that big was unnerving to say the least.

Jordan let go of my hand. “She won’t bite, I promise.” He petted her face, and nodded for me to do the same, so I did. There was certainly nothing threatening about her besides her size. If anything, she looked bored.

“This the horse you use for all your beginners?”

He shrugged. “She’s one of my lesson horses. Noreen does most of the lessons, though. I train the horses, she trains the riders.”

“Sounds like heaven for you, then.”

“Definitely.” He tousled Nova’s forelock. “This one’s mostly retired now, though. She spent the last couple of years leased to the therapeutic riding center, but now she’s pretty much doing a lesson here and there in between playing out in the pastures.”

“Retired? How old is she?”

“She’ll be twenty-nine this year, if you can believe it.” He smiled fondly at her. “Healthy as all hell for a horse her age, but she’s earned her keep.” He looked at me. “Anyway, you’ve never been on a horse before? In your life?”

“No,” I said, still eyeballing Nova, “the idea of getting on an animal ten times my size who could run that fast just never appealed to me.”

Jordan snorted. “Yet you don’t have a problem hurtling down a snow-covered mountain on a couple of waxed boards with a pair of toothpicks for control?”

I laughed. “Well, when you put it like that, it almost sounds crazy.”

“It is crazy.” He reached out of the stall and picked up the bridle that had been hanging on a nearby hook. “Put me on the fastest, least trained horse in the world and I’ll be fine. Leave me on top of a mountain with skis on? I’ll still be there in the morning.”

“Hey, at least my skis won’t spook at something.”

“No, but horses are pretty good at not crashing into trees.”

“Touché.”

Chuckling, Jordan put Nova's bridle on. Then we headed out of the stall, and the mare plodded between us on the way to the arena where we'd photographed Arturo and Bravado ages ago.

While we walked, I glanced over my shoulder at the thin crowd of clients congregating near the other arena.

"So, do your clients know about this?"

"What? That I give riding lessons?" He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Don't tell them, okay?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, I mean…"

"Us?" He shrugged. "They know I'm gay. That's all they need to know. Your clients know about you and Angel?"

"Some do," I said. "You said your sister figured it out, didn't you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, she did."

"We don't advertise it, but obviously some catch on."

"You didn't do a hell of a lot to keep it under my radar." He glanced at me, eyebrows up as a playful grin worked its way onto his lips.

"Damn right we didn't." I returned the grin. "We *wanted* you to catch on."

"Guess your evil plan worked, then, didn't it?"

"So it did."

Jordan led the mare and me into the arena, then closed the gate behind us. Sasha appeared from a nearby pasture and found a shady spot beneath a tree where he dropped into the dust, panting while he watched us. I tried not to notice him. As if I needed two animals making me nervous.

"So," Jordan said. "Since you've never done this, we'll start with the very basic stuff. Getting on and off, balancing, steering."

"Stopping?"

"Yes, stopping." He put the reins over Nova's head and laid them across her neck, just in front of the saddle. "To get on, you're going to hold a piece of her mane and your reins in your left hand, and the saddle in your right. Left foot in the stirrup, then pull yourself up and swing your other leg over." With a pointed look, he added, "Just don't drop into the saddle. Some people do that, and it drives me nuts. Let yourself down gently."

"Sounds simple enough."

"Quite simple." He stepped aside, keeping one hand on the bridle. "Go for it."

Certain this would be one of those things that was easier said than done, I stepped up to the horse. I gathered the reins and a lock of Nova's mane in one hand, put my foot in the stirrup and held the back of the saddle. Then, just as he'd told me to, I pulled myself up, swung my leg over and eased myself into the saddle.

Okay, not so difficult.

Jordan showed me how to hold the reins, how *not* to put my foot in the stirrup and all of those things that I didn't realize actually had a technique to them. With all of that out of the way, it was time to wake up Nova and make her move.

"When you want to stop," he said, "sit back in the saddle, tighten up on your reins, and say 'whoa'."

"Got it." *I think.*

"Now, when she's moving, your balance is going to come from your lower body. As the horse's center of gravity shifts, yours will too, and you want to move with her. It's tempting to hold on to the saddle, but don't. You need your hands free for the reins. You'll be using your hips and legs for balance, and while you won't be grabbing on to her with your legs if you know what's good for you, you will hold on a bit with your upper legs." He put his hand on my knee. "If your inner thighs don't hurt tomorrow, you're doing it wrong."

"That's encouraging."

He laughed. "It'll hurt less the more you do it. Just wait until I make you ride bareback." Our eyes met, and if the way he blushed was any indication, his mind had also gone right back to that comment he'd made when he was riding Bravado.

"I think I'll stick with a saddle, thanks," I said.

"Chickenshit." His eyes sparkled with a devilishness that rivaled Angel's. "Okay, let's walk. Just tap her *gently* with your feet, but don't dig your heels in."

"What would she do if I did?"

"Nova? Nothing. Any other horse? She'd be halfway across the arena, and your ass would be in the dirt."

"Oh, that's…comforting."

He chuckled. "That's why you're on Nova for now. Go on, give her a tap and let's get started."

As he suggested, I nudged her with my feet, and she lurched into motion. Jordan walked beside her head, and I tried to find my equilibrium. The shifting-swaying-shifting of the horse's gait was foreign, to say the least. As she plodded along, jarring me with every alien step, I was even more impressed with Jordan's ability. He flew over jumps with no saddle, no stirrups, but with perfect grace and balance. At this rate, I was certain if Nova stumbled or turned sharply, I'd be facedown in the dirt.

Jordan looked over his shoulder at me. "Any trouble staying on?"

"I'm still on, aren't I?"

"See? Told you it wasn't difficult. Now why don't you try steering her a bit?" He led Nova toward the middle of the arena, away from the fence. "When you want to turn, it's not just a question of pulling a

rein in either direction. Turn your head and look the way you want to go. Your torso will shift, as will your lower body, and she'll respond to that." He gestured around us. "Try making some circles and figure eights."

Following his suggestion, I turned my head to the right. Sure enough, Nova responded, changing her slow, lazy course according to the direction I'd turned.

"Okay, now bring her to a stop," he said. "Remember, sit back a little, tighten up on your reins and say 'whoa.'"

Before I could, Nova stopped abruptly. I instinctively grabbed the front of the saddle to keep my balance.

Jordan laughed. "Nova, you're supposed to listen to him, not me." With a hand on her neck, he looked up at me. "Doing okay?"

"I'm still on, so I'd say so far, so good."

He smiled. "Well, now we're going to try something a bit more challenging."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah." He gestured at the far end of the arena. "Think you can handle a few jumps?"

My heart stopped.

Jordan winked. "Just fucking with you."

"Bastard."

"Don't worry, you won't be going anywhere near a jump any time soon." He absently patted Nova's neck while he went on. "I'm going to keep leading her like this, but you're going to close your eyes."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you still fucking with me?"

He shook his head. "Absolutely not. It forces you to pay attention to how she's moving, and adjust your body and center of gravity accordingly without relying on watching her. You have to learn to feel and respond without thinking."

"You're serious. You really want me to ride around on a half-ton animal with my eyes closed."

He nodded.

"You're insane."

"No, I'm the trainer," he said. "Honestly, I will be walking right beside her, and she's not going anywhere unless you or I tell her to."

I swallowed.

Holding my gaze, he said, "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do." I pointed at the creature below me. "It's *her* I'm not too sure about."

Jordan laughed softly and stroked her neck. "She'll do whatever I tell her to. Just close your eyes and focus on staying balanced." His expression turned serious. "Honestly, Dante, you won't fall. You'll instinctively balance yourself more than you think, so you're just

learning to trust that instinct." He paused. "You'll be fine. Just trust me."

I took a deep breath, shot him one last uncertain glance, then closed my eyes. Even like this, with the horse simply standing, I couldn't help feeling like I was on unnervingly unstable ground. She didn't move much, but just her breathing and the mere knowledge I was on her back made me nervous.

"Ready?" Jordan asked.

"I guess you could say that."

He murmured something to the horse, and she lurched into motion again.

The sway of her gait was even more pronounced now. By the time I'd shifted to accommodate a step, she took another and I was off-balance again. It was dizzying, the simultaneous side-to-side forward-back motion.

"Doing okay?" he asked.

"As well as can be expected."

"Just keep your eyes closed. You're doing fine. I'm going to turn her around now, so pay attention."

Right. Like I'd thought about anything in the last few minutes but where and how the horse moved. Denied my sight, I was more than a little disoriented when she turned. My sense of direction was all fucked up, my head spinning like she'd just gone in a dozen tight circles instead of, I guessed, making a one-eighty. The needle on my internal compass whizzed back and forth until some noise and voices from the barn behind me oriented me again.

With my sense of direction back on track, I realized Nova had been moving the whole time I'd been trying to reorient myself. Just as Jordan had predicted, I'd balanced without thinking. The more I relaxed and didn't try to second guess her motions or my responses, the less certain I was that I would fall. Eventually, her movements felt almost natural.

"That's about enough for one day," Jordan said.

I opened my eyes, squinting against the sunlight. "Damn it, just when I was getting the hang of it."

"You still want to be able to walk tomorrow, though, don't you?"

"Yeah, good point."

"Okay, bring her to a stop."

As he'd told me before, I sat back a little, gently pulled back on the reins, and said, "Whoa." Since I was expecting it this time, the halt didn't throw me quite so far off-balance.

"I assume there's a trick to getting from here to the ground in one piece?"

He shrugged. "I could undo the cinch and let you fall."

“Or, you know, if there’s another technique…”

“Lucky for you, there is.” He walked me through the series of simple motions, and just like getting on, it wasn’t difficult. A little awkward for someone who wasn’t used to it, especially when the ground turned out to be an inch or so lower than I expected it to be. I stumbled, but Jordan’s hand on my back kept me from doing much more than sacrificing a few seconds of dignity.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” he said. I wasn’t so sure, but I’d take his word for it for now.

We took Nova back to the barn and put her away. Then we strolled down the barn aisle with Sasha wandering beside us. Even while Jordan and I shot the breeze and made small talk, my eyes kept darting toward the dog. Unnoticed, I hoped.

Fat chance of that.

Jordan snapped his finger at the dog. “Sasha, lie down.”

The dog immediately obeyed, dropping onto his belly at his master’s feet. Jordan knelt beside him and patted his back. Sasha rolled over.

“Good boy.” Then Jordan gestured at me. “Come here.”

“Hmm?”

He nodded at the dog. “He’s not going to hurt you.”

My stomach immediately coiled itself into knots. Intellectually, I knew the dog wouldn’t do a damned thing. He was on his back, showing unquestioning submission to Jordan, and didn’t appear in the least bit aggressive. That, and the horse had been as docile as Jordan had said she’d be, so I had no reason to believe he’d mislead me about Sasha.

Kneeling beside Sasha, I had visions of that black lab snapping at me, and the blood on my father’s hand that could have come from my face if things had gone down differently. But this wasn’t some dog my dad had just met. This was Jordan’s dog of God only knew how many years, so I took a breath and reached down to pet him.

I was still a little edgy, running my hand over the dog’s coarse fur, but he hadn’t taken my hand off yet, so maybe he was okay after all.

“See?” Jordan smiled. “He’s about as docile as Nova.”

I nodded. “Yeah, he didn’t strike me as terribly aggressive. You know how phobias are, though.”

“Yep, I do.” He scratched Sasha’s belly. “Sometimes just facing them down can help. I figured since you didn’t have a full-on panic attack whenever he was around, you’d be okay.”

“Guess you were right.” I patted Sasha’s side. He still made me a little nervous, but something about touching him and seeing for myself that he wasn’t going to do anything relaxed me a little. It was a start.

At Jordan's command, the dog stood and shook the dust out of his coat. I held out my hand, and Sasha sniffed it, regarding me curiously at the same time.

After a moment, I pushed myself to my feet.

"On a horse and playing with the dog." Jordan grinned at me as he petted Sasha. "Angel will be most impressed."

I laughed. "That or he'll demand photographic evidence."

"That could be arranged. I have my camera phone with me."

I gave the most indignant sniff I could muster. "A camera phone? I *beg* your pardon."

He rolled his eyes. "Camera snob."

"Damn right," I said. "If it ain't Nikon, I don't want anything to do with it."

"So you'd probably have heart failure if you saw the Canon I have in the house?"

I clicked my tongue. "Well, that explains why you hired us to come take pictures."

"Good point."

With the dog plodding beside Jordan, we kept walking out to the gravel parking area. Out in the sun instead of the dim light of the barn, I glanced down at the dust and horse hair on my shirt. I brushed some of it off, but my hands weren't much cleaner, so it didn't help.

Jordan pursed his lips. "I suppose Angel will have a fit if you walk into his house like that."

"Nah." I made another futile effort to dust off my clothes. "He's been around horses. That's about the only kind of dirt he can handle."

"Still, it wouldn't be right to send you home dirty." His eyes darted toward the barn, probably making sure none of his other clients had wandered in our direction. No one had, but when he faced me again, he lowered his voice anyway. "I could, of course, assist with that."

"Could you, now?"

"If you wanted me to, yes." His eyebrows lifted slightly, a silent "please?"

"Well, when you put it like that…"

We exchanged grins, then went into the house.

In the shower, we went through all the motions of getting clean, but spent more time soaping each other than ourselves. Even that was only when we could bring ourselves to stop kissing beneath the hot water, and the longer that went on, the less we stopped for anything. We were long past the point of needing to get clean, but being naked under hot water with Jordan, I wasn't about to rush out.

Jordan lathered his hands. "Want me to get your back?"

"I most definitely do."

“Well, I live to serve.”

I turned around. Jordan’s soap-slicked hands slid easily over my wet skin. Up my back, down again, up and over my shoulders. He pressed the heels of his hands into my muscles, letting his fingers fan out as they followed a shiver up my spine. I had to rest an arm against the wall just to keep myself upright; my entire body wanted to melt beneath his gentle massage.

After a while, he said, “That enough? Or more?”

I could have let him do it all night, but instead, I turned around. As soon as I faced him, I grabbed the sides of his neck in both hands, kissing him passionately before he had a chance to react. He was still for a second, probably startled, but then he wrapped his arms around me, and we were once again lost in a deep kiss that was hotter than the water rushing over us. Even if his rock-hard cock wasn’t pressed against mine, his arousal would have been unmistakable in the rapid, uneven breaths he took and the way his fingers clawed at my back.

I dipped my head to kiss his neck. “In any hurry to get back to work?”

“Not at all.”

“Good.”

It only took a hint of pressure on the back of his neck, and he went to his knees. He wrapped his fingers around my cock and looked up at me, eyes wide and eyebrows raised. I nodded.

God in heaven, I could never get tired of the way this man sucked cock. I closed my eyes, letting my head fall back while he deep-throated, teased, deep-throated, teased again. My knees shook, and my head spun. I couldn’t even feel the water on my back anymore. All my senses were completely focused on Jordan’s hand, Jordan’s mouth, oh, God, Jordan’s tongue.

As much as I wanted to, and as much as he made it nearly inevitable, I didn’t want to come just yet.

I moistened my lips and opened my eyes to look down at him.

“Stand up,” I said. As soon as he was on his feet, I whispered, “Go get a condom and lube.”

He nodded. I kissed him lightly, and he stepped out of the shower, pausing just long enough to grab a towel before disappearing from the bathroom.

I let the water run over my neck and shoulders, rinsing away the last of the soap he’d so attentively put on my skin. My legs were feeling it from my lesson, but let a little muscle pain stop me from fucking Jordan? Not in this lifetime.

He returned, condom and lube in hand.

Stroking his cock, I whispered, “I want you to put it on me so I can fuck you.”’

Before I'd even finished speaking, he had the wrapper torn and my cock in his hand. I chewed my lip, my entire body tingling and aching with the need to fuck him. The second he'd finished putting on the lube, I turned him around and shoved him up against the tile wall.

I kissed the back of his neck and released a low groan as I pushed into him. Jordan pushed back, whimpering as he took me deeper. The first few strokes I took were slow and easy as they always were, giving him a chance to get used to me. Instead of picking up speed, though, I kept moving slowly, sliding in and out of him at just the right pace to make him shiver with pleasure and curse with frustration. I continued like that, slow and gentle, until he relaxed and surrendered, no doubt accepting I'd made the decision—Dom's privilege, after all—to give him this and only this.

Then I grabbed onto his hips and slammed into him, and I fucked him hard. Kept fucking him hard. The sound he released was the most delicious cry of surprise and ecstasy, and his fingers grabbed at the wall, searching in vain for something to hold on to.

My own balance wavered, so I braced myself with a hand against the wall beside his shoulder. With my free hand, I held on to his hip, and I thrust into him like I was hell-bent on fucking him within an inch of his life.

The intensity almost forced my eyes closed, but I kept them open. I had to see him. I had to watch myself moving in and out of him. Sweat and water mingling on the back of his neck. Water droplets slipping over his shoulders, shaken loose whenever his muscles twitched and tensed and trembled. His arms shaking as he tried to keep his balance. He was so fucking beautiful.

A shudder rippled through him, and he whimpered like he was about to lose it.

"Like that?" I had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Yes," he moaned. "Oh God, I want to come."

"Not yet." I kissed his neck. "Your orgasms belong to me. You'll come when I say you will."

He groaned and shuddered again, but held back. I fucked him harder. His shoulders bunched, and his hands clawed at the wet tile.

"Please, let me come," he moaned. "Fuck, Dante, you feel so good, please, please…"

"Not yet." *Almost, almost*, I wanted to say, but I couldn't find my breath. Forcing myself to stay in control, I shut my eyes tight and gritted my teeth. I was right there on the edge, just like he was, but I wasn't ready for this to be over quite yet. I bit my lip, taking a few more strokes, but delirium was closing in fast, and just before oblivion would have swept me under, I found enough air to whisper, "Come."

Jordan whimpered, and I let his climax carry me right into my own. I held on to him, he braced against the shower wall, and somehow we both stayed on our feet while tremor after tremor tried to knock our knees out from under us.

His orgasm tapered.

Mine tapered.

We both released our breath, and I pulled out slowly, but beyond that, we didn't move for a moment. I put my arms around him and kissed his neck.

"If this is how every lesson will go," I murmured, "do sign me up for more."

Chapter Sixteen

Jordan

Dante's platinum blond hair was still damp, and as we both dried off in the bathroom, I witnessed the meticulousness with which he styled it into his customary spikes: fingers through the hair a few times, glance in the mirror, fingers through the hair once more, shrug, done.

"And here I thought you had to work at getting it to look like that," I said.

He shrugged. "Oh, I put more effort into it if I'm going out or something."

"Define 'more effort'."

He ran his fingers through it again, threw an intense scowl at the mirror, then shrugged again. Our eyes met, and we both laughed.

After we'd dried off, we got into bed and pulled the sheet up over us. Dante draped his arm over my waist, but we kept a few inches of space between us. Not that I minded being as close to him as humanly possible, but we were both still hot from the shower, so we stayed apart to stay cool.

"So do I have to pay extra for that part of the lesson?" he asked.

"I'd say we'll call it payment *for* the lesson, but I think that qualifies as prostitution."

"Hmm, yeah, good point."

"I wasn't planning to charge you for the lesson anyway," I said. "So we'll just call it even."

"Just to be sure, give me a few minutes and I'll fuck you again. *Then* we'll be even."

I shivered. Something told me he wasn't kidding.

He touched my face, then kissed me lightly. It still blew my mind how gentle he and Angel could be. Though I'd understood dominance and submission wasn't all about pain and black leather, I hadn't expected the intimacy or, if I dared describe it as such, the tenderness. They were more attentive and even affectionate than any lover I'd had before.

"What's on your mind?" he asked, drawing me back into the present.

I shrugged. "Just thinking about how this is going versus how I thought it would."

Propping himself up on one elbow, he trailed his fingertips down my cheek again. "And?"

I moistened my lips. "It's…definitely not what I expected."

"In what way? I mean, good or bad?"

“Good, good, definitely good.” *I think*. “Can’t quite describe it, but it’s…” I furrowed my brow.

“More intimate?”

I hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, you could say that.”

He trailed the backs of his fingers down the side of my face. “Sometimes it works out this way. We’ve had relationships with subs that were strictly business. Get together, some flogging, some fucking, thank you and good night. With others, it’s more like this.” He paused. “Quite honestly, I prefer it when it’s like this. Means we have a better connection with you. Not so many barriers between all of us. The closer we are to you, the more likely we are to pick up on any problems before they become problems. That kind of thing.”

“Makes sense.” *But how close is too close?* I cleared my throat. “I’m curious, what happened with your other subs?”

“They’ve come and gone over the years,” he said with a half shrug. “Some were more or less one-nighters. Some found other Doms and decided to go for something more monogamous.”

“Have you ever had something like this end badly?”

He was quiet for a moment, his eyes losing focus as he slowly ran the tip of his tongue across his lower lip. “A time or two, yes. We had one who fell for Angel.” Dante clicked his tongue. “I mean, head-over-heels, completely in love with him.”

“So, what happened?”

“We had to cut him loose.” He sighed. “We have a rule about getting emotionally involved. It’s not that we want to stay cold and distant, but we have to keep some distance to keep things from getting too complicated, you know?”

“That makes sense, yes.”

“Most subs get that and aren’t after anything more anyway.” He absently combed his fingers through my hair.

“How do you guys make it work, anyway?” I asked. “With both of you being Doms?”

“Oh, it was tough at first, believe me.” He watched his hand run up and down my arm. “It’s probably a good thing we met when we did. We were both still figuring out we were Doms at that point. Figuring out what that means, anyway. Another couple of years down the line and we might have just passed each other by, thinking we weren’t compatible.”

“At least you two figured it out fairly early on.” I smirked and rolled my eyes. “I made it into my mid-thirties before I even knew what a submissive really was.”

Dante smiled. “Better late than never.”

“True.” I trailed my fingertips down the side of his neck. “On the bright side, doing so now meant I’ve had you guys to show me the

way."

"Oh, you'd have found a decent Dom if we hadn't been around." He picked up my hand and kissed the backs of my fingers. "But of course, we're always happy to help a new sub."

"Much appreciated."

He leaned forward and kissed me gently. Then we both settled back on the pillows. "Anyway, like I was saying about me and Angel, we got together, then started figuring out how much we both needed submission. About the time he moved here to live with me, we'd realized we needed to do something as a compromise. Since neither of us is willing to submit, we decided to bring in subs."

"Seems like that's worked well for you."

"Oh, it's definitely worked." Dante smiled, though there was a distant look in his eyes. "Angel was a little worried in the beginning. He wasn't so sure he liked the idea of using someone, and in a way, that's what we were setting out to do." His eyes refocused, and he turned his head toward me. "But then we figured they needed something, we needed something, why not make a deal?"

"Interesting way to put it."

"Guess I've been around him too long. Learning to put things extra bluntly. It's true, though. We're not out to use someone like some kind of sex toy. It's supposed to be a mutual thing."

"It certainly has been with me," I said. "If you're worried I'm not getting anything out of it…"

We both laughed. He went on. "And as a bonus to this whole thing, it means I get to fuck someone once in a while."

"Angel really doesn't like it, does he?"

"No, not at all. It's just not his thing. We tried many times, and he still would if I asked him to, but…" Dante shook his head. "I don't ask him because I know he doesn't like it."

"So the only time you get to do it," I said, "is when you guys have a sub?"

He nodded.

"I think I'd go crazy."

"I make do." He smiled. "Honestly, it's been frustrating at times, but given the choice between that and being with Angel? I can live with it."

"Well, you can use me for it any time you want."

His smile faded a little, and he draped his arm over my waist. "We're not using you for anything, Jordan."

"You know what I mean."

He looked away for a second, and when our eyes met again, his were intense with something I couldn't quite identify. "As long as you're our sub, you're as much a part of this as we are. Yeah, we do

this because submission is something we can't get from each other, but you're not just a sex toy for us."

I swallowed. "I know. And you guys have never made me feel like that's all I am." *Quite the contrary*, I thought with a pleasant shudder.

"Good." He lifted his head to kiss my forehead. "If we ever do make you feel like that, or like we're outnumbering you, speak up." He traced the curve of my spine with his hand. "This is as much about you as it's about us, and it should be fun for everyone."

"Nothing to worry about there."

"That's what I like to hear." He pushed himself up on one arm and pulled me closer with the other. "We want you to enjoy this as much as we do." With that, he kissed me. He and Angel were forever complimenting my oral techniques, but they could both do to me with a kiss what I did to them with a blowjob. Like Angel, Dante knew just how to send electric tingles down my spine with the gentle, deliberate way he coaxed my lips apart and drew my tongue into his mouth. He was in absolute control of the kiss, deciding how intense, how deep, how long, without ever being overbearing or unduly demanding, and I loved it.

"I could keep doing this all night," he whispered.

Please, please, please. "Don't let me stop you."

Dante kissed me gently, then sighed. "I would *so* stay if I didn't have a bunch of stupid responsible adult things to do tonight."

"We could always spend a little more time doing fun adult things." I trailed my fingers up the back of his neck. "If you wanted to, of course."

His lips curved into a grin against mine. "Oh, I absolutely want to. I'm just trying to decide between being a responsible adult and…not."

"Putting on a condom counts as being a responsible adult, doesn't it?"

"I fucking love the way you think, Steele." His palm drifted down my back and he pressed his hard-on against me. "Question is, do you want me to stay a little longer?"

"Only a little longer?"

"Okay, a while longer," he whispered and kissed me again.

A "while longer" was an understatement to say the least, but we eventually decided to return to the rest of the world. Though it required a degree of willpower I didn't think I possessed, we managed to get out of bed, into our clothes, and down to Dante's car. He didn't leave quite yet, though.

Not giving a rat's ass who saw us or what they thought about us, I put my arms around him. "So, am I going to be able to talk you into another riding lesson?"

"I don't think you'll have to twist my arm." He slid his hands into

my back pockets. “Especially if the roll in the hay is included.”

I laughed. “You don’t even have to have the lesson to get that.”

“Good to know.” He kissed me, and we both let it go on longer than we probably should have.

I was out of breath when we separated. “Guess I should make sure to block out a few hours for your half-hour lessons, then.”

“Or we can make do with the time we have and have a quickie now and then.”

“Do you or Angel even know the meaning of the word ‘quickie’?”

He made a flippant gesture with one hand. “Well, we know the *meaning*…”

“But have you ever applied it?”

“Not in recent memory, no.” He inclined his head. “Unless you want us to rush things?”

“No, no, not at all. I rather like the way we’re doing things.”

“That’s what I thought.” He pulled me to him and kissed me lightly. Even when he broke that kiss, he stayed close. He kept one hand in my back pocket and brought the other up to touch my face. For the longest time, we just held each other’s gazes. The only sound was Dante’s thumb brushing back and forth over my cheek.

And from somewhere deep down came the certainty that there was something very, very wrong with this. A prickle of guilt started at the base of my spine and spread its tingling tentacles upward.

He shouldn’t have been looking at me like that, but he was. I shouldn’t have been looking at him like this, but I was. When he tilted his head and kissed me, he shouldn’t have kissed me like *that*, but he did.

He touched his forehead to mine. “You’re still coming over tomorrow night, right?”

Tomorrow night. Their house. *Angel*. That’s what it was. Angel wasn’t here. Prior to tonight, we’d played one-on-one, but always with both of them in the same room. This was the first time we’d slept together without Angel.

The prickling eased, receding back to the base of my spine, but not dissipating completely. It was just something new, that’s all, I told myself. I’d just had sex, an intimate conversation, and a gentle kiss with someone else’s boyfriend. Angel knew full well that Dante was here. If he’d come around the corner and caught us like this, he’d have sooner joined in than gotten upset.

We hadn’t broken any of the agreed-upon rules, just the normal rules that most people abided by in their relationships. *All’s well. Crisis of conscience averted.*

I think.

Dante touched my face again, and I jumped.

"You okay?" he asked. "You spaced out on me."

I shook my head. "Sorry. I was—" *Think, Steele, think.* "Going over tomorrow's schedule in my head. Making sure nothing had come up."

"I hope nothing has?"

"No. Barring any unforeseens, anyway."

He smiled. "Good. I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

He kissed me again, and I paid no attention to my conscience screaming at me that this was too tender and far too intimate.

"I should go," Dante finally whispered.

"I know. I need to get a few things done myself."

"Okay." He kissed me lightly, then let me go. We shared one last, long look. Then he got into his car and I headed back down to the barn to check water, clear my head, and bring a few horses in from turnout.

"Taking your work home with you?"

Noreen's voice just about made me jump out of my skin. I spun on my heel. She stood in the office doorway, arms folded across her chest and a knowing expression on her face.

"Noreen," I said. "Jesus, you startled me."

"*So* sorry." Her eyes darted in the direction of the dust cloud Dante's car had kicked up. "I know it's none of my business, but God *damn*, Jordan."

My face was on fire. "What?"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "If you're going to hook up with a hot guy, could you please not rub it in?"

"Rub it in?" I laughed. "I haven't said a word about him."

She grinned. "No, you were just letting him kiss your face off in the driveway."

"I didn't know you were watching." I made a half-assed effort to look sheepish, and she just rolled her eyes.

"I'm just messing with you." Arms still folded across her chest, she leaned against the doorframe. "Actually, it's good to see you seeing someone else." Nodding in the general direction of the house, she added, "Does this mean that dipwad will be out of here soon?"

"God, I hope so."

"We'll have an empty stall at the end of the month," she said. "You could always have him sleep there."

"I wish." I laughed. "Hopefully he'll be out of my hair before it comes down to that."

"So what about that other guy? Think you'll be moving him in here soon?"

"Noreen, Jesus," I said. "You just saw me kissing him, now you think I'm going to move in with him?"

“Well, as long as you’re going to have that kind of eye candy, the least you could do is keep him around for me to ogle.”

“I thought you didn’t want me rubbing it in that I was with a hot guy.”

“I don’t.” She shrugged. “Which is why you just parade him around, but don’t do anything to remind me he’s doing you and not me.”

Clicking my tongue with mock disapproval, I rolled my eyes. “Have I mentioned lately what a lady you are?”

“Probably around the same time I mentioned that you were a gentleman.”

I gestured toward the driveway. “Well, *he* says I’m pretty gentle with—”

“Oh, fuck you, Jordan.”

“And to answer your question, no, I’m not planning on moving him in here.”

“Damn it.” She paused. “Well, when you do bring him around, would you mind keeping all that kissing and crap out of sight?”

“Homophobe.”

“I am *not*,” she scoffed. “I just don’t want to see *you* making out with someone.”

“So you don’t want pictures of—”

“Fuck you.” The office door banged shut behind her.

I continued down the aisle, chuckling to myself. My smile faded as I walked, though. While I brought in the last few horses for the night and topped off water buckets, I couldn’t get this evening out of my mind. I’d had that momentary panic in Dante’s arms, that certainty we were doing something wrong, and now that he was gone, some of it resurfaced.

We were playing by the rules, I reminded myself. Nothing we’d done had been outside of what the three of us had agreed upon. Angel knew where Dante was. Even if Dante and I hadn’t explicitly planned to end up in the shower or in bed together, there was no rule in place forbidding it. I imagined Angel asking Dante for every last explicit detail, both of them winding each other up before dragging each other into the bedroom.

Then why the hell was I so off-balance in the wake of that long, gentle parting kiss? So we’d shared a tender kiss? So we’d talked in bed? So we’d made—fucked? Twice? Without Angel? It was all within the rules. We’d done nothing wrong.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. It was just foreign territory, that was all it was. Things were getting more intimate between all three of us, so of course they’d be that way when we were one-on-one. If Angel had been the one here tonight, things would have

been the same. Right down to the tenderness and the lingering looks. It was just new. That was all.

At the end of the aisle, I forced back the thoughts in my head and the butterflies in my stomach, focusing on all things work-related.

I scanned the massive whiteboard. All the horses' names were listed with their owners, lesson schedules, turnout schedules, feeding instructions, and whatever other pertinent information we needed at a glance. Today I'd had several lessons, including Dante's, but tomorrow I had none. I always tried to keep them all on the same day so I could focus on horses instead of riders during the rest of the week.

Footsteps approached behind me. Without turning around, I said, "Hey, Noreen, would you mind using Dee instead of Juliet for Heather's lesson tomorrow?"

When she didn't answer, I turned around, and immediately tightened my jaw.

"Sorry to disappoint," Eli said with a sneer.

I resisted the urge to let out a sharp, frustrated breath. I was so not in the mood for this shit. "What's up?"

He shrugged. "I was just getting ready to go out to get something to eat. Wanted to see if you wanted to go."

Going out? On whose dime? I forced out a terse, "I'll pass, thanks."

"You sure?" His expression bordered on sad-puppy-dog territory.

"I'm sure." I turned around and busied myself making some changes to my riding schedule and some turnout assignments.

"Listen, I was thinking maybe we could spend some time talking."

It was a good thing my back was turned. That way he didn't see me roll my eyes. "I've got some things to do tonight." I cringed at my own inability to just tell him to fuck off.

"Maybe tomorrow night, then?"

Tomorrow night. *Fat chance, my friend*. "Can't. I'll be out. Probably late." My tone colder, I added, "Why don't you give Curt the Bartender a call?"

Eli let out a breath. "Okay, listen, is there any time we can just sit down and talk about a few things?"

I faced him. "Depends. Does 'a few things' include you telling me where you're working and when you're moving out?"

His cheeks colored and he turned away.

"Eli—"

"I'm working on finding a job," he snapped. Then his shoulders fell and his tone softened. "I just want to talk. About…things."

I barely suppressed a groan. "We've done enough talking." I turned around to continue making adjustments to the schedule on the board. "I'm not sure what else you think we need to discuss."

"Well, you were always complaining we didn't communicate

enough."

"Fixing our communication problem now would be about as effective as patching the hole in the *Titanic* after it was already at the bottom of the ocean."

His shoes scuffed on the cement. Probably fidgeting or shifting his weight. "Jordan, I'm serious, this is—"

"Hey, Jordan," Noreen called from the other end of the aisle. "Dr. Paulson's on the line. Says he needs to talk to you."

"Be right there." I capped my marker and glanced at Eli. "Sorry, I have to take that call."

"I figured," he muttered through his teeth. At least he'd learned not to argue when that particular vet called. Dr. Paulson was the vet who oversaw the farm's breeding operations, and if he needed to talk to me, that was that.

I started up the aisle, and Eli stayed right with me.

"So I suppose you'll need me to take care of the dog tomorrow night," he growled.

"If you wouldn't mind."

"I assume you'll be out with *them*." Only Eli could assign such unmistakable identity to a single pronoun just by spitting it out with so much disgust.

"Not that it's any of your business." I looked straight ahead and walked a little faster. Finally, I made it to the office door, and Noreen stepped aside to let me in.

"Have fun tomorrow night," Eli snarled and kept going, throwing over his shoulder, "I'll make sure Sasha's in."

Noreen closed the door, and I stopped, muttering a string of profanity.

Then I turned to her. "Sorry. What line is Dr. Paulson on?"

"He isn't." She leaned against the door. "Just thought you might need an escape route."

"Thanks." I blew out a breath. "I owe you big-time."

"Oh, don't worry about it." She pushed herself off the door and went to Laura's vacant desk. She dropped herself into the weathered old swivel chair. "I do hope your new man means you're one step closer to being done with that fucker."

I rubbed my forehead. "Yeah, if that one would just get out of my house."

"Kick him out."

"You make that sound so simple."

"It is simple. 'Eli, out.'" She shrugged. "What's so complicated about that?"

"I know, I know." I sat on the edge of Laura's desk. "He'll be out of here soon, one way or the other."

She shot me a skeptical look. “Jordan Steele, why are you letting this guy walk all over you?” She nudged my leg playfully. “You are not a doormat and never have been.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I guess I feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry for him?” She snorted. “Why? Because you cut him loose? Sounds to me like you did him a favor.”

“Gee, thanks.” Under my breath, I added, “Bitch.”

Grinning, she showed her palms. “Hey, I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“You’re as bad as my sister.” I rolled my eyes. “And yes, yes, I know, I need to kick his ass out.”

“Damn right. Then you can start bringing that other sexy thing around more often.”

I laughed quietly. “Oh, I’m still bringing him around.”

“Good. You really don’t think you’ll move him in, though?”

I shook my head. “Pretty sure that’s out of the question.”

“He’s not into commitment? Or you’re done with commitment for a while?”

“Uh, well.” I coughed and scratched the back of my neck, avoiding her eyes. “He’s definitely into commitment…”

“He’s not married, is he?”

“Well, no…not…”

“Jordan, there’s no ‘not really’ about it.” The chair squeaked. “Please tell me you’re not seeing a married or otherwise attached man, or so help me I will break your arms.”

“Yes, he’s ‘attached’, but—wait! Let me finish!” I put my hands up, and she sat back down, giving me a glare that said her threat to break my arms was anything but empty. “His boyfriend knows about us, and he’s cool with it.”

“Seriously?”

I nodded.

“So, he’s such a rampant sexy bastard, he needs more than one man to satisfy him?”

My cheeks burned. “Something like that. Actually, I’m…” I trailed off. Noreen and I were such close friends, we sometimes forgot she was my employee, but how much did I really want her to know?

“You’re… what?” She raised an eyebrow.

I cleared my throat. “I’m seeing both of them.”

Her jaw dropped. After a moment, she let out a sharp breath. “Damn you *straight* to hell, Jordan. I swear, I want to come back as a gay man in my next life.”

“What?”

“I haven’t been on a date in months, and here you are nailing two gorgeous men.” She clicked her tongue. “This is so unfair. And if Eli

wasn't such a twat, I'd even say you were lucky to have him trying to get back together with you. He *is* a looker, after all."

"You want him?"

"Pfft." She waved the thought away and scowled. "The part about him being a twat cancels out his good looks. He's all yours."

"Gee, thanks."

"Then kick his butt out."

I hoisted myself off the desk and onto my feet. "I will, I will. We've been through this."

"And I'll keep harping on you until you do it."

I glared at her playfully. "You're such a good friend."

She grinned. "I do what I can."

"Yeah, whatever. Now get out of here."

She jumped to her feet. "Not gonna argue with that." On her way to the door, she paused. "In all seriousness, I'm glad to see you with someone else now. Even if you are being a bastard and hogging all the pretty ones."

After Noreen left, I sank into the old swivel chair she'd occupied. I couldn't argue with her about Eli. Evidently he subscribed to the philosophy that men are like driveways: lay them right the first time, walk all over them forever.

And I'd let him. I could blame him all I wanted, but the fact was, I'd let him use me as a doormat, and I was still letting him do it.

I cursed under my breath. I'd give him until the end of the month. If he didn't come up with something, then I'd put my foot down, give him an ultimatum, and kick his ass out.

Just like I promised myself I'd do *last* month.

Chapter Seventeen

Dante

Angel sat on one end of the couch. I sat on the other. My feet were on the coffee table, my laptop across my legs. Angel balanced his computer on one knee while the cat took up the rest of his lap. The only sound was the music coming from his iPod—some cover of an eighties song I couldn't quite place—and the quiet clatter of fingers on keys.

This wasn't unusual for us. We were both perfectly content spending evenings working, just being in the same room together, or even in separate rooms if one of us needed to use our desktop computers. Tonight, though, something was…off. The cushion between us seemed bigger than I remembered, pushing the ends of the couch farther apart than they'd been all these years.

It wasn't a hostile distance, just distance. A few miles of space I didn't recall being there before.

A thought occurred to me. Racking my brain, I couldn't remember the last time it had just been the two of us. We were together at work. We spent most of our spare time with Jordan. At home, we were both constantly working, and aside from cooking together and being in bed at night, we simply hadn't spent much time together lately.

I closed my laptop. "Do you want to go out tonight?"

Angel's eyed flicked up. "Anything in mind?"

"Something other than staying home and working?" *And being a million miles apart on the same couch*.

"I need to get these done." He gestured at his screen. "Client wants them by Friday."

"And you've got three hours at the studio tomorrow with nothing booked." I put my laptop on the coffee table. "Seriously, when's the last time we actually went out?"

Angel chewed his lip. Then he sighed. "God, you're right. It's been awhile." He set his computer on the end table and looked down at Jade. "You're going to have to move, baby." He picked her up and gently parked her on that ever-expanding cushion between us. She glared at him, then put her head on her paws and went back to sleep.

I stood and reached for my wallet and cell. "Whose car do you want to take?"

"How much gas do you have?"

"Full tank."

"I'm down to a quarter. Mind taking yours?"

"Not at all." I took my key off the rack, and we went out to the garage.

We'd already had dinner but both decided we could go for something sweet, so we settled on an all-night diner not far from the studio. Sitting in a fake leather and faker chrome booth in the corner, listening to a 1950s Wurlitzer playing 1980s heavy metal, we each ordered a cup of coffee. I went for the apple pie, and Angel opted for the tiramisu.

After the waitress walked away with our order in hand, I looked at Angel. "Coffee *and* tiramisu? You're going to be like a hamster on crack by the time we leave."

He winked. "Guess I'll just have to find an outlet for all that energy, won't I?"

"I guess you will."

He extended his arm across the table so his hand was in the middle, palm up. I put my hand over his.

"I definitely needed this." He rubbed his eyes with his other hand. "I was about to go cross-eyed from staring at the screen."

"Yeah, tell me about it." I ran my fingertips back and forth along the inside of his wrist, tracing the lines of his tattoo. "I think we both needed a break. And a little time with just the two of us that didn't involve work."

He smiled and laid his free hand over mine. "You were right."

About that time, the waitress arrived with our coffee and food. She paused just long enough to throw a sneer in the direction of our hands before we separated to make room for the plates and saucers, but she quickly shifted her attention to giving us our desserts. I gritted my teeth. *I do hope you know that won't bode well for a decent-sized tip, lady*.

Once she and her attitude were gone, I put some cream in my coffee while Angel, preferring it black, sipped his own.

"Ugh." He grimaced and set it down. "I thought I ordered coffee, not swamp water."

I laughed. "You know the coffee here sucks." I gestured with my cup. "Why do you think I pollute it?"

"Good idea." He reached for the creamer. "Ah, well. At least their desserts are decent."

I chuckled and sipped my coffee. He was right. Even with a liberal dose of creamer, it had about as much flavor as watered-down mud.

"So, speaking of needing a break." He absently tapped his fork on the edge of his plate. "I was thinking, we haven't even thought about where to go for our next trip."

"Hmm, good point, we haven't." I took another sip of the poor excuse for coffee. "Well, we went to Asia the last three times, so where do you think we should go this time?"

"If I can twist your arm into going to Asia again, we still haven't

been to that tiger temple in Thailand."

I raised an eyebrow. "The one that turns the tigers loose with the tourists?"

"They're not loose."

"Uh-huh." The pictures of tourists sitting beside full-grown tigers, petting and scratching them like they were oversized lap cats, had made me cringe. Angel, on the other hand, had drooled all over the website and travel brochures. I was willing to do a lot of things in the name of adventure, but posing with a cat with teeth and claws that big was about as appealing as taking a dunk in a shark cage. Then again, Angel hadn't had any problem doing that either. I, on the other hand, had stayed on deck and waited to get in the water somewhere where our guides weren't throwing meat and blood over the side to attract sharks.

"Oh, come on," he said. "It would be fun. They're just big cats."

"Sure. Just big cats." I rolled my eyes. "And sharks are just big goldfish."

"Hey," he said, pointing at me with his fork, "you could at least keep an open mind. After all, I went along with *your* idea of checking out Vladivostok and Lake Baikal."

"And Vladivostok and Lake Baikal were fucking cool."

"No, they were fucking *cold*."

"Well, yeah." I sipped my coffee and shrugged. "It's Siberia. What did you expect?"

He glared at me. "We could have at least gone in, say, August."

"And you think it would have been balmy and tropical in August?"

"It might have been a bit warmer than October."

"Fair enough. But we packed for cold weather, and we stayed warm enough." I picked up a forkful of apple pie. "I'm not quite sure if dressing in layers would do us much good if a tiger got pissy."

"Oh, come on." He waved his hand. "If they were prone to biting people, the monks wouldn't let anyone in to play with them."

"Oh, all right," I said. "We can put it on the list, but no promises."

"It's on the list, that's a start," he said with a toothy, triumphant grin. "Okay, so what other options are there?"

"There's always Borneo."

Angel put his hands up and sat back, shaking his head. "No, no, I'm not going back to Borneo. Not. A. Chance."

"Not even if I beg?" I batted my eyes. "There's some gorgeous rainforest there I want to shoot."

"If we want to shoot a rainforest, I vote Brazil," he said. "Every time I set foot on that island, something bad happens."

"Honestly, Angel," I said, laughing. "Food poisoning can happen

anywhere. And you've been back to Pakistan twice since you were robbed there."

"True." Ticking points off on his fingers, he said, "But Borneo's the only place I've been shot at, robbed, gotten food poisoning, *and* had the mother of all insect bites."

"Was that really any worse than that thing that bit you in Kenya?"

Angel shuddered. "Why the hell does everything bite me, anyway?" He narrowed his eyes at me. "They never bite you."

Behind my coffee cup, I grinned. "I guess you just taste better."

"Touché." He fidgeted. "Still, I'm cursed when it comes to Borneo."

"To be fair, that was on the Indonesia side, and you *were* there covering a civil uprising, right?"

He shrugged. "Okay, yeah, I was."

"So, getting shot at or robbed is kind of par for the course, don't you think?"

"That doesn't explain the bites or whatever it was I ate on the other two trips." He took a bite of his tiramisu. "I'm telling you, if I set foot there again, I'll end up as a hostage with appendicitis and a side order of leprosy."

Laughing, I picked at my apple pie with my fork. "So, what if we go, but stick to the Malaysia side? Or Brunei? I've been wanting to check those out for a while."

Angel pursed his lips. "We can put it on the list. But so help me, if I get sick again, or robbed, or some little bastard bitey thing chews on me again, you're not going to hear the end of it."

"Hey now," I said, holding up a hand, "I forgave *you* for dragging me on that tornado-chasing trip."

Angel chuckled. "God, can you imagine us in an old folks' home someday? We'll still be giving each other shit for this stuff." Adopting a gravelly voice, he said, "Yeah, well, you made me climb Mount Everest when I just wanted to have a relaxing vacation in Nepal, you bastard."

In a similar voice, I said, "And you convinced me to eat a live silkworm in Shanghai just because I talked you into trying fried rat, you son of a bitch."

He snickered. "You're never going to forgive me for that, are you?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely not." I put my hand on the table as he had earlier, and he laid his over mine. Leaning a little closer, I said, "But, you did make it up to me that night, so I can't complain too much."

"Damn right you can't."

The conversation continued wandering, following our years of globetrotting while we tried to figure out where to go next. We'd long

since reduced our desserts to crumbs and choked down two or three cups of swamp-water coffee when we finally asked for the check. The sneering waitress gave us a dirty look when we went to leave, but I just slipped my arm around Angel's waist and ignored her.

In no time flat, we were home, pulling in the driveway as the garage door rose in front of us. To my surprise, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. Though we were home together, I'd enjoyed our evening out and wasn't quite ready for it to be over yet.

I put the car in park and turned off the engine. Our seatbelts clicked, then whirred back into place, but when Angel reached for his door handle, I touched his leg.

"Wait."

Hand still on the door, he stopped. "Hmm?"

"Don't get out yet." I put my arm around his shoulders and leaned across the console. He let himself be drawn to me, and by the time my lips touched his, his hand was on the side of my face. It was a gentle kiss, the kind that happened for its own sake, not necessarily as a prelude to something else, both of us seeking just to taste and feel each other. An eternity must have passed before we even separated our lips enough to let my tongue slip into his mouth. His fingers tightened in my hair, and he inhaled deeply through his nose as we pulled each other closer.

At some point, we drew back so we could see each other. I stroked his hair. He caressed my cheek.

He swept the tip of his tongue across his lower lip. "We should do this more often."

"Make out in the garage?"

Angel laughed. "Well, okay, I won't object to that." He ran the backs of his fingers down the side of my face. "I mean, get out of the house. Just the two of us."

"You're right, we should." Pulling him closer to me, I kissed him again.

"I guess," he said between gentle kisses, "we should get back *in* the house too."

"We will." I dipped my head to kiss his neck. "Eventually." He moaned, tilting his head to the side, and I took full advantage of the exposed flesh, exploring everything from his jaw to his collarbone as if I'd never tasted him before. I loved the way his skin felt against my lips, especially the subtle vibration of his voice when he moaned. Smooth and soft here, lightly stubbled there, every inch warm, vaguely salty, and unmistakably Angel.

"Have I ever told you how much I love when you do that?" he whispered.

"Mm-hmm," I murmured. "Why else would I do it?"

He started to say something else but let his voice trail off as I found that sweet spot just beneath his jaw.

It was my turn to moan when his hand drifted up my thigh to gently squeeze my erection. Angel took advantage of my distraction and nudged me with his shoulder so I'd raise my head. He kissed me, parting my lips with his tongue as he pushed me back against the driver's seat. Once he had me where he wanted me, he dipped his head to kiss my neck while his fingers drew my zipper down.

"I was thinking we could just go in the house." He paused to nibble my earlobe, pressing his teeth in hard enough to make my breath catch. "But then I thought, to hell with it. You're here." He freed my cock from my jeans and boxers. "I'm here." Stroked slowly, gently. "And I want to suck your cock."

I didn't argue, and he didn't wait for me to argue. In an instant, his mouth was around my cock. I reached back and held on to the headrest with one hand, gasping for breath every time he moved his lips, his tongue, his hand. My other hand rested on the back of his neck, and the ends of his hair tickled my skin in time with his rhythmic up-down-up movements.

"Jesus, Angel," I whimpered. "Oh, fuck…you're gonna make me…" I licked my lips. "I want you to fuck me."

He responded with a moan so soft I felt it more than heard it, and I didn't have to ask what it meant. He was going to fuck me, all right. Good and hard, as only Angel could.

But he wasn't done with me yet.

He teased the head of my cock with the tip of his tongue while he stroked with one hand. He knew exactly how I liked it. How hard to stroke, when to flick his tongue and where to flutter it, and *precisely* when to deep-throat.

"Just like that," I breathed. "Fuck, Angel, just like…just…"

Stroke. Flick. Flutter. Deep-throat. Oh God.

Soundlessly, breathlessly, gripping his hair and the headrest for dear life, I came, wondering for a fleeting second if this car could even contain the shockwave after shockwave of this powerful orgasm. When Angel stopped a heartbeat before I couldn't take anymore, I took in a few deep, desperate gulps of air.

Then Angel sat up and kissed me, and his salty kiss made me light-headed.

"Let's get in the house," I whispered, panting against his lips. "I think I owe you for that."

"I think I like that plan." He kissed me one more time before I quickly fixed my clothes. After exchanging one last glance, Angel was out of the car in about two seconds, but on my way out, I dropped my car keys.

“Shit,” I muttered. I felt around on the floorboard, finally found them, and shoved them into my coat pocket as I got out.

I’d barely gotten the door closed behind me before Angel grabbed me and forced me up against the car.

“Come on,” I said, panting against his lips. “The house. Bedroom. Let’s—”

“No, I can’t wait.” He pulled my head back and kissed my neck, letting his stubble graze the side of my throat. He sounded out of breath when he whispered, “Dante, I have to fuck you. Now. I fucking have to.”

“But we’re—”

“You still keep that bottle of lube in your glove box?” he murmured just below my ear.

I shivered. “Of course.”

“Good.” He raised his head and kissed me passionately. Hungrily. Pressing his cock against mine, he whispered, “Because we need it. *Now*.”

“I don’t have any condoms out here with me.”

Angel patted the side of his jacket, indicating the inside pocket.

“The bedroom’s right down the hall.” My trembling voice betrayed me as much as my shaking knees.

Angel kissed me again, pausing just long enough to whisper, “When was the last time we did something crazy like this?”

Far, far too long ago. I didn’t argue. He let me go, and I opened the door and reached for the glove box. Just as I’d hoped, I still had that small bottle we’d left in here after the last time we couldn’t wait. Whenever that was.

Once I was out of the car, lube in hand, Angel was against me. His kiss was breathless and hungry like it hadn’t been in recent memory, and both of our hands trembled as we struggled with my belt. Then Angel tore the condom wrapper with his teeth while I unzipped his jeans. We were both shaking now, breathing hard, and I stroked his cock a few times, enough to make him close his eyes and lose his breath.

He grabbed my wrist. “No, no, stop,” he whispered. He opened his eyes and moistened his lips. “I don’t want to come until I’m inside you.” I let go of his cock and he nodded toward the car. “Turn around.”

As soon as my back was to him, he bent me over the car with enough force that, if I gave a damn about anything besides Angel fucking me *right now*, I might have been concerned about denting the hood. While he shoved my jeans and boxers over my hips, I flattened my hands against the car, searching for some kind of handhold even though I knew I’d find none. Beneath my palms, the hood was almost

completely cool, only a hint of residual engine warmth lingering. How long had we been out here? Long enough to need to fuck over the car, evidently, and Angel didn't waste any time now.

After only as much careful slowness as he needed to make sure he didn't hurt me, he thrust all the way into me. I gasped, my eyes watering from the sheer intensity, and he didn't give me a chance to remember how to breathe properly.

The shocks creaked and protested beneath us. Every breath, every groan, every thump of my hips against the frame echoed through the garage. Something about it probably hurt, being forced up against metal, fucked *that* hard, *that* fast, but if it did, I didn't notice. Let it hurt. He just felt too damned good for me to care.

A deep groan emerged from the back of his throat, and he gripped my hips tighter and fucked me just a little harder. Now it did hurt, and oh, God, it felt good. Pressing my forearms against the hood's slick metal, I pushed back as much as I could, meeting his violent thrusts.

"Holy shit, keep doing that," he moaned. "Oh, yeah, just…" He trailed off into a wordless whimper, digging his fingers into my hips so hard his nails bit my skin. Then he shuddered, forced himself as deep as he could and slumped over me. Sharp, ragged breaths cooled the side of my neck.

After a moment, he put his hands beside mine on the car and kissed just behind my ear. "We really should do this more often."

"Mm-hmm."

His lips brushed my neck, making me shiver when he spoke. "I love you, Dante."

I put my hand over his on the hood and turned just enough to be able to meet his lips. Just before he kissed me, I whispered, "I love you too, Angel."

Chapter Eighteen

Angel

"Get on your knees."

Jordan responded to Dante's command as he always did: quickly, without hesitation. Already naked from Dante's earlier orders, he knelt beside the bed in our guest room, keeping his eyes down.

Dante combed his fingers through Jordan's hair. "Look at me, Jordan."

Jordan raised his eyes. His Adam's apple bobbed once; then he released a long breath. His shoulders dropped a little. His eyes already had that blissful, almost glazed appearance. I grinned to myself before going back to stirring the melted white wax in the slow cooker. Even knowing what we had in store for him tonight—perhaps *because* of what we had planned—he slipped easily into that submissive mindset. Not quite subspace in its truest, endorphin-charged sense, but he'd be there soon.

I scooped some molten wax out with the ladle, then let it drizzle back into the cooker. Oh yes, he'd be there *very* soon.

I'd been dying to play with Jordan and hot wax for a while now. He loved pain so far, and when I'd broached the subject of wax, his eyes had lit up like I'd just offered him a small fortune. Some subs liked pain, some tolerated it and some *lived* for it. Jordan fell so hard into the third category, I was sure I was dreaming.

And now we'd see how he liked wax.

"What are your safe words?" I asked.

"Red and yellow."

"Good," Dante said. "Stand up." When Jordan was on his feet, Dante held out a black blindfold. "Put this on."

Once Jordan's blindfold was on, I looked at Dante. He met my eyes, a silent "Ready?" in his.

I nodded.

Dante guided Jordan onto a sheet we'd spread across the floor. He had Jordan lie on his stomach with a pillow under his hips and his head resting on his folded arms. While they got situated and Dante made sure Jordan was comfortable, I dipped the ladle in the wax and brought it out again. I held it a few inches above my arm and poured some wax on the inside of my wrist. It stung like a bitch, enough to make me grind my teeth and bring a few curses to the tip of my tongue but not enough to cause injury. Perfect.

"Ready?" I asked.

"He's all yours," Dante said.

Scraping the dried wax off my wrist, I grinned. "Excellent."

~*~

I couldn't help shuddering on Jordan's behalf when Angel pulled the ladle out of the wax. Any kind of pain play we did with our subs, we'd long ago tried on ourselves beforehand so we knew exactly what we were inflicting on them. Hot wax wasn't my thing, but Angel and a lot of submissives loved it.

This was Jordan's first time with wax. He loved pain, so we'd just see how he handled this particular variety.

I sat beside Jordan and ran a gentle hand up the center of his spine. His back arched a little, muscles quivering. Searching for the pain he knew was coming, I guessed. I lifted my hand away, let it hover, then touched him again. He sucked in a breath each time my fingers made contact. I waited until he didn't respond at all, until my touch didn't warrant so much as a change in his breathing.

Then I nodded to Angel. He dipped the ladle in the wax again, and I pulled my hand away.

Jordan, no doubt expecting the soft, gentle touch of my hand, nearly came up off the floor when the first drop of wax landed between his shoulders. He pulled in a sharp hiss of breath, every muscle in his body tensing while Angel drew a serpentine line of scorching wax on Jordan's back and shoulders.

I trailed my fingertips down the back of Jordan's neck, letting the ticklishness contrast with the wax stinging his back. He squirmed, gasped, moaned.

"Doing okay?" I asked.

He nodded but didn't speak.

"Answer him, Jordan," Angel growled.

"Yes, I'm fine," Jordan said through clenched teeth.

"Good." I stroked his hair. Angel and I exchanged glances, and he continued drizzling molten wax across Jordan's beautiful shoulders. Jordan barely made a sound besides a sharp gasp here or a profanity-laced groan there, but the breaths in between were made of pure pleasure. Just the kind of pain slut Angel had been itching for. Angel bit his lip whenever Jordan moaned. He responded to every sound Jordan made as if Jordan were giving him a blowjob, not enduring the sting of scorching rivers and lakes of wax on his skin.

~*~

The pain was unreal. It was just this side of bearable, singeing nerve endings that were unaccustomed to this kind of intense, painful heat. The more he gave me, the dizzier the endorphins made me, and

the pain became some twisted coupling of ecstasy and agony, surging through me like cold fire, hot ice, something equally and impossibly contradictory.

And, oh God, it was incredible.

Instinctively, I flinched and drew away each time fresh pain came, but when the shock wore off a heartbeat later, I'd arch toward it, seeking more, only to flinch away from the next sting. I couldn't tell if the tears in my eyes were from the pain or the pleasure. Probably both.

Sometimes it all bordered on too intense. Too many nerves reeling from the heat. Wax burning a particularly sensitive area of skin. Overloaded senses. And every time I tried to find the ability to speak, to ask Angel to ease off, if only for a moment, the single word never made it past the tip of my tongue, because every time it nearly did, he backed off. Every damned time, he backed off. Even Dante's fingers stilled on my neck.

When the pain receded to something more tolerable, returning to the realms of pleasure, Dante's fingers moved again. Just gentle strokes, somewhere between a caress and a massage. And, as if he too knew, Angel waited until the exact moment when my senses were ready before he poured more liquid fire on my skin.

He stopped again, this time of his own accord. With what I assumed was his thumbnail, Angel gently removed the wax that had accumulated across my back and shoulders. Cool air touched my now-uncovered skin, and I gritted my teeth, anticipating the next barrage of delicious pain.

Before it came, though, a hand rested on my shoulder. "Get up on your hands and knees," Angel said. He kept his hand on me and steadied me while I changed position. Then he let go.

There was movement around me. Shuffling, rustling, shifting. I didn't focus too much on who was doing what or what any of the shuffling around me meant. All I could concentrate on was the lingering burning and the anticipation of more sizzling pain.

Someone's hand touched the small of my back. I gritted my teeth, my eyes screwed shut behind the blindfold, knowing what was coming. My nerve endings tingled as they searched for that burn, that sting. Where would it fall next? Where would the fire start this time?

I had only a split second to react to the unexpected cool lube against me before more liquid fire landed between my shoulder blades. I groaned, overwhelmed as Angel poured wax on my skin and Dante pushed his cock into me.

Dante slid deeper. The wax burned hotter, sending a surge of endorphins through my body. Dante's cock hit my prostate *just* right. Never in my life had I experienced this kind of ecstasy, the lines

blurring between pain and pleasure until I couldn't tell one from the other. A choked sound escaped my throat as pain chased pleasure through my veins, and I couldn't draw a deep breath. As soon as I had almost a lungful of air, searing pain or a violent thrust knocked it right back out.

Angel stopped to remove the wax from my skin again, but Dante kept moving, fucking me at ever-changing speeds, never letting me get used to one. Sweat ran down my neck and my aching, trembling arms. Every muscle in my shoulders quivered and shook and threatened to forget how to hold me up.

The blindfold was moot now. There was nothing to see, because nothing existed beyond my nerve endings. Nothing in the universe except heat, pain, pleasure, and oh God, I wanted to come so fucking bad.

Heat met my arm, and I instinctively flinched, but then realized it was a soft, painless warmth. Skin. A hand.

"You all right?" Angel's voice was gentle.

I nodded. "My arms are getting tired."

Voices murmured over me. Then Dante withdrew, and I couldn't help whimpering when he pulled all the way out. No, no, I didn't want this to be over yet. *Fuck me, Dante, please, don't stop, don't stop*. But he did stop, and I didn't argue.

Angel stroked my arm with featherlight fingertips. "Let's have you get on your back."

~*~

Dante and I guided Jordan into position, making sure the pillow was still beneath his hips. Our nearly delirious submissive's arms and legs trembled. His flushed skin was drenched with sweat, and his hand shook as he reached up to wipe some of that sweat from his forehead.

We both sat back, each keeping a hand on Jordan so he knew we were still here. The unspoken question hung between us: what should we do next? Jordan had just enough hair on his chest to make wax unpleasantly painful, so that was out. I put the slow cooker off to one side. Once it was a safe distance away so no one would bump into it, I looked at Dante again.

"I've got a few more things up my sleeve," I said. "You want to keep fucking him while I torture him?"

Jordan sucked in a breath.

Dante grinned. "I like that plan." He leaned over Jordan. "Don't think we need this anymore, though." He slid the blindfold off, and Jordan blinked a few times. His eyes were wet with tears, and for a second or two, he might not have been sure where he was.

Dante stroked Jordan's cheek. "You okay?"

Jordan licked his lips and blinked a few times again. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Good," Dante said, "because we're not done with you yet."

Jordan's eyes widened. Dante reached for the bottle of lube, and I rose to go to the chest of drawers to see what other implements we could use to make Jordan squirm. While I searched through a drawer, the sounds behind me were enough to make me unbearably hard: caught breaths, murmuring voices, flesh colliding with flesh in that unmistakable rhythm of bodies moving together. Two men in ecstasy. It just didn't get any sexier than that.

With a couple of nipple clamps in hand, I turned around, and for a moment, I just stared at them.

Watching them together was breathtaking. There were no two ways about it. Just the way Dante's body moved was beyond sexy. His arms and shoulders rippled and trembled, his powerful legs tensed and relaxed, tensed and relaxed, and it all culminated in deep, hard thrusts that made my body react as if I were the one inside Jordan. I moistened my lips and kept watching, mesmerized.

Jordan gripped Dante's upper arms with shaking hands, and Dante's expression was one of pure bliss. His lips were apart, and the slightest furrow created creases between his eyebrows. A shiver ran up my spine; I knew what he was feeling, what it was like to be deep inside Jordan like that. A twinge of guilt tried to tug at my gut, but I pushed it back.

Jordan could give Dante something I couldn't.

I flinched at my own unspoken thought and forced it out of my mind. So what if that was something I couldn't give Dante? That was one of the many reasons we had submissives in the first place.

Dante didn't quite close his eyes, instead holding Jordan's gaze. Jordan looked right back at him. They stared right into each other's eyes.

I shifted, and it wasn't just to accommodate how hard I was. Something about them, about the way they focused on each other like no one else existed, sent a chill straight to my core.

I knew that look. God damn it, I knew it, because that was how Dante looked at me.

And when Dante turned his head just then, meeting my eyes over Jordan and across the room, that was *exactly* how he looked at me. My spine tingled from the base to my neck, nearly collapsing when Dante's lip curled into the faintest of grins and he winked.

He turned his attention back to Jordan, and I crossed the room to join them in their feverish universe. Sitting beside Jordan, I held up the nipple clamp so he could see it. His eyes widened and his breath

caught. When I put it on his nipple, he gasped, but it was Dante who moaned. Dante let his head fall forward and kept thrusting, screwing his eyes shut and grimacing from exertion. And ecstasy, of that I had no doubt.

I teased Jordan with the other nipple clamp, running the cool prongs over his skin, around his nipple, inching closer, backing away, inching closer again. He squirmed and his back arched, and when I finally put it on his nipple, he flinched, then whimpered.

"Fuck," Jordan said through clenched teeth. "Oh…fuck…" Eyes shut tight, he held himself back. He didn't have to be told not to come. He knew better. But the more he was told not to come, the harder it was for him to hold back, and what was a Dom if not a relentless tormentor?

"I know you want to come, Jordan." I played with the nipple clamps, moving them just enough to make sure he couldn't ignore them. "But you won't, will you?"

He growled with frustration. He knew he had to answer me, and between Dante fucking him and me manipulating the clamps, speech was probably too much to ask for. Which is exactly why I asked for it.

"Jordan, don't—"

"I won't come." The words came out fast and slurred. "I won't. I… fuck…"

"Do you want him to make you come?" I asked.

Jordan's teeth chattered, and he writhed beneath Dante. "Yes," he moaned. "*Please*."

"Not yet," I said.

"Oh God," Dante moaned. He thrust harder. His forearms rippled and his biceps quivered, his washboard abs extra pronounced from the exertion of fucking Jordan hard and fast.

Jordan whimpered again. His back lifted off the floor. His eyes were shut tight, his jaw clenched, and I kept at it with the clamps, knowing the combined stimulation would be *this close* to too much for him to take.

Dante closed his eyes and grimaced, the cords on his neck standing out as he forced himself as deep into Jordan as he could. "Fuck, I'm gonna… I'm…"

"Don't come yet, Jordan," I whispered. "Because he's just about to, and I still want to fuck you before you do."

Jordan held his breath.

With a groan and a shudder, Dante took one last thrust into Jordan and came.

~*~

Holy fuck. The blinding, earth-shattering orgasm almost rendered my bones completely useless, but somehow, I held myself up on my shaking arms. I breathed slowly, evenly, letting the aftershocks pass.

"You all right?" Angel's voice was tinged with amusement.

"Oh, yeah. I'm good." I blinked a few times until my eyes focused. Then I leaned down to kiss Jordan, making sure to let my chest brush over the nipple clamps, and he gasped.

"What's wrong, Jordan?" I singsonged.

"N-nothing." He moaned softly. I glanced at Angel, then dropped another light kiss on Jordan's lips before I sat up and pulled out.

"I'll leave you in his hands," I said.

Jordan's eyes darted toward Angel, eyebrows lifting slightly, and I thought he held his breath.

"Looks like you're all mine, then," Angel said.

I got up, steadying myself with a hand on the bed until the room stopped whirling around me. After a moment, it did, and I bowed out to get rid of the condom.

When I came back from the bathroom, Angel was inside Jordan, and I'd never seen anything so arousing in all my life. Jordan writhed beneath Angel, and Angel leaned down to manipulate the nipple clamps with his mouth. I shivered. He'd done that to me a million times before, and it was fucking amazing. The softness of his lips and tongue contrasted so sharply with his teeth and the clamp, it was unbelievable. I couldn't *not* come to save my life when he did that, and judging by the cursing and moaning, Jordan was having a hell of a time with it too.

I knelt beside them, resisting the urge to run a hand over Angel's sweaty skin. I wanted to touch him but didn't want to screw up his rhythm.

Angel lifted his head, and he moved faster now. His brow furrowed with intense concentration, lips pulling tight over his teeth, and every breath was sharper than the one before it. His shoulders quivered, and every thrust of his powerful hips made my mouth water.

"Oh fuck," Jordan breathed.

"Not yet," I said. "Don't come yet. We're not done with you."

He groaned, digging his teeth into his lower lip. I tugged and gently twisted the nipple clamps. He screwed his eyes shut, his hands clawing at the sheet beneath him as his back arched and sweat rolled from his forehead into his hair. When I leaned down to kiss him, a helpless moan vibrated against my lips. He was losing it, there was no doubt about that, and everything we did made it harder for him to hold back.

"Oh…my God…" Angel groaned. I sat up, giving him room to lean

forward, and he took it, resting his weight on his hands and giving Jordan everything he had. After a few violent thrusts, Angel's spine straightened. He threw his head back, gasped and came so hard he fell forward onto his forearms.

Jordan took advantage of the pause, keeping his eyes closed and taking slow, deep breaths. I put my hand on Angel's shoulder to get his attention. When he looked at me, I nodded toward Jordan, then gestured for him to move back.

Still trembling and panting, Angel pulled out and sat back on his heels. As soon as he was out of the way, I went down on Jordan.

He gasped. "Oh, Jesus Christ…"

"You're not going to come, are you?" Angel asked.

Jordan made a frustrated sound, probably a string of curses stopping at his lips. Then, "No, I won't."

"You're right, you won't," Angel said, his voice a combination of serious and playful. Then he got up to go dispose of the condom, and while he did, I didn't let up on Jordan at all. On and on, I stroked and sucked his cock while he went out of his damned mind. Seconds passed, maybe minutes, I couldn't tell, and he fell apart with every breath, but he held back.

"Fuck, please let me come." Jordan's voice shook. "Please, Angel —" His voice was abruptly cut off. I glanced up to see Angel kissing him deeply, passionately, just the way we both knew drove Jordan insane. Angel pulled on one of the nipple clamps, and Jordan's hand hovered in midair, opening and closing like he wanted to grab on to Angel's hair but wasn't sure if he was allowed.

Angel broke the kiss, and Jordan sounded on the verge of tears when he whispered, "Please…"

"Yes."

~*~

My entire damned world exploded.

Angel's kiss and Dante's mouth sent me into and beyond the stratosphere, and I was distantly aware of the floor dropping out from under me. I'd been riding the edge for so long, holding back for so fucking long, the release was nothing short of shattering.

Even when my orgasm had subsided, the shaking didn't stop. My back sank down to the floor, my breath found its way to my lungs, and I couldn't move. I kept a hand over my eyes, blocking out the light, and just breathed. There was movement around me. Someone came closer, someone else's footsteps faded into the background.

Someone's hand touched my shoulder. One of the nipple clamps disappeared. Then the other.

“You okay?” Dante’s voice was as soft as his touch.

I nodded.

After a long moment, footsteps emerged from somewhere else, and Angel knelt beside me. Gentle fingers trailed down the side of my face.

“Think you can get up?” Angel asked.

“I think so.” With both of their help, I sat up. The world shifted and lurched. I rested my elbows on my knees and closed my eyes again, taking a few deep breaths while everything spun around me. One hand stayed on my shoulder, the other went up and down my back.

“You all right?” Angel whispered.

“Dizzy.”

“Take your time.” He kneaded the back of my neck. “Just tell us whenever you’re ready to get up.”

I nodded and rubbed my temples. God only knew how long I sat like that, but they didn’t rush me. When I was finally steady enough to chance it, they helped me to my feet and into the bed. I rested my head on Angel’s shoulder, and with the warmth of both their bodies beside mine, the trembling gradually subsided.

~*~

Dante sat up slowly. “I’m going to grab a shower. You okay staying with him for a few?”

Stroking Jordan’s hair, I nodded. “Don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

Dante smiled. “Is he even awake?”

Jordan murmured something but didn’t open his eyes.

I laughed softly. “Let him sleep if he wants to.”

Dante got up and went into the bathroom. While he showered and Jordan slept, my mind wandered.

Dante and I had always fed off each other as Doms. Years of intimacy and co-dominance had given us a psychic link of sorts. We each knew the other’s move before it was made, responded to thoughts that hadn’t even been spoken.

We’d never developed that kind of connection with a sub, though. A connection, yes, but not like this. Jordan spoke our language, unspoken though it was. Dante and I read his subtle signs with ease, the little tells that something had become too much or that he was ready for more. The catch of his breath, when his muscles tensed more than usual and didn’t relax, the exhalation just before he shook that tension out of his shoulders. Some subs were harder to read than others. When was a flinch just a flinch? When did it mean I needed to

back off or stop altogether?

Of course communication between the three of us was essential, but the more we could pick up off his body language and subtle tells, the more likely we were to nip a problem in the bud rather than push him beyond what he could handle. Communication and intimacy were crucial, but now I wondered, was there such a thing as too much of both?

I hadn't missed the way Dante had looked at Jordan while they moved together. And hadn't I looked at Jordan the very same way while I was inside him? Like it was just him, me and this breathless, unbelievably intimate sex?

I didn't know what this was. What the fuck was going on? I had no clue. There was a bond between the three of us I couldn't quite define. Maybe there also existed a similar bond just between Dante and Jordan. Another between Jordan and me.

The one thing I was sure of, lying there with Jordan resting on my shoulder, was that this was unlike any Dom/sub/Dom relationship we'd ever had.

~*~

That was weird.

Hot water ran over my neck and shoulders, but I barely felt it. I was too busy feeling something else, and it had me racking my brain for answers that wouldn't come.

We'd gotten Jordan deep into subspace. Whenever he gave signs it was too much, I caught them immediately, and obviously Angel had too, since he'd backed off. Jordan had never asked us to stop or back off because he'd never needed to; everything had stopped every time before it reached that point.

This was the connection we'd hoped for with every submissive. Now that we had it, it was unsettling because it went deeper than just the connection between a submissive and his Doms. This was something more. Something that had narrowed the entire universe to the three of us.

And that was to say nothing of the sex itself. I was used to submissives turning me on, but Jordan aroused me and made me come like only Angel had before. For that matter, sex with Jordan could narrow my world to us. Just Jordan, me and the space between his eyes and mine while I moved in him.

Angel had been there. He hadn't been cropped out of the image. I'd shifted my attention to Jordan, to Angel, to Jordan, to Angel. Neither pushed the other completely out of the picture; each simply rendered the other…out of focus.

And whoever was in focus at any given time was intensely so, looking back at me like he could see straight into me. It had always been that way with Angel, but a sub?

Shit, what was going on?

Deep down, I knew. This had gone much deeper than it had ever gone with any other submissive. Much deeper than it *should* have gone. My stomach twisted with guilt while my mind reeled with confusion. I wasn't supposed to feel this way. This was against the rules. It was wrong.

But it *was*.

~*~

Lying beside Angel, it was all I could do to stay awake. I drifted in and out, not fully awake, not quite asleep.

The pain cooled. The endorphins receded. In hindsight, it all seemed so much more intense, the memory of the sensations overwhelming me now as much as the sensations had in real time. The bits I could remember, anyway. More than a few moments had melted together into a pain-blurred fog, my mind recalling only what I'd felt, not always who was where or what had happened.

That kind of half awareness might have made me nervous in the hands of someone else, but I trusted the two of them enough to let go without fear. From the beginning, it had been easy to surrender to them. With time, that surrender came easier and easier. It simply made sense to submit to them. I slipped into subspace with ease, knowing when I came back out of it I'd be safe in the arms of Dante, Angel, or both.

Something drew me out of the vague, hazy state between asleep and awake. I blinked a few times and turned to Angel.

He gave an apologetic look. "My arm's falling asleep."

"Oh, sorry." We both shifted until we were facing each other. He rolled his shoulder gingerly, then laid his arm over me.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded. "I'm good. You?"

"Never better." I glanced around the room, getting reacquainted with where the hell I was. "Where's Dante?"

"In the shower." His eyes flicked up, looking past me. "Actually, speak of the devil…"

I looked over my shoulder as Dante came out of the bathroom, his damp blond spikes as carefully arranged as they ever were. He got into bed beside me and draped an arm over my waist. "Doing okay?" he asked, nuzzling my neck.

"Mm-hmm."

“Mind if I go grab a shower?” Angel asked.

“Go ahead,” I said. “I’ll probably get one myself when I can stand.”

“No rush,” Dante murmured. “You can stay here as long as you want.”

Angel kissed me gently, then sat up. He paused, giving Dante and me an unreadable look before he stood and left the room.

Once he was gone, Dante pulled me a little closer. With his warm breath on my shoulder and our hands clasped together against my chest, I almost drifted off again. It was only my mind that kept me awake.

This wasn’t what I’d read about. The connection between the three of us was nothing like anything I’d found in my late-night searches on the Internet. Maybe it just didn’t translate well into the articles and websites I’d found.

Or maybe, just maybe, this was something completely different.

Chapter Nineteen

Angel

"Ryan?"

Phoebe's voice startled me, and I looked up from…whatever I'd been staring at.

"Sorry, what?"

She started to speak but hesitated. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." I sat back in my chair and leaned on an armrest, trying to appear casual. "What's up?"

"I said I'm done burning the DVDs for those three weddings." She pointed over her shoulder into the other room, where she and Troy shared a computer. "While I'm set up for it, did you have any others ready to go?"

I looked at my screen, blinking a few times. Hell if I could remember if I had anything ready for her. I couldn't even remember what I'd been working on just then.

"Um…" I cleared my throat. "No, no, nothing yet."

For a second, she eyed me, probably debating whether or not to question my obvious distraction. Then she just shrugged and disappeared into the studio as she said, "Okay, cool."

I pulled my sleeve back to check my watch. It was twelve thirty. Dante and Troy were at a shoot and would be back any minute.

"Actually," I called after her, "maybe we should head out to our next client pretty soon."

She leaned in the open doorway from the set. "Already? We don't have to be there until two."

I got up and took my jacket off the back of my chair. "I know, but I haven't eaten yet." I put on my jacket. "We can stop on the way. I'll buy."

"Free food?" She grinned. "Let me get my camera bag."

As promised, I bought her lunch, and we spent a half an hour or so talking shop over burgers and steak fries. She had some intriguing ideas for some engagement-portrait sessions, so I agreed to let her take over for the last twenty minutes or so of a couple of scheduled shoots, assuming the clients agreed to it.

Like our lunch conversation, the afternoon's shoot was mercifully distracting. It was a commercial client needing promotional photos of his artwork, and the eccentric artist was a relentless perfectionist. His neurotic need to control every angle, every light, every shadow, rivaled my own. Today, I welcomed that. My patience with him even outlasted Phoebe's, and she could put up with *me* on most days without breaking a sweat. As far as I was concerned, as long as he had

me adjusting lights and angles down to fractions of millimeters, I wasn't thinking about anything else, so I didn't mind.

As all distractions eventually do, though, the shoot ended, and before I knew it, Phoebe and I had packed up our gear to head back to the studio. On the way, I got on the freeway, even though I knew it would be bumper-to-bumper at this hour. After taking our exit, I didn't take my usual back roads, knowing full well the main road I was on was littered with far too many stoplights and other cars.

Phoebe noticed. She didn't say a word, but the pauses in conversation and her furrowed brow in the rearview told me she was well aware of our unusual route. I was the most impatient driver on the planet and loathed sitting in traffic, and she knew it.

She didn't ask, though.

Eventually, we pulled into the studio, and my heart sank when I saw Dante's car in the parking lot. I hoped to God they'd taken Troy's car to their next shoot, but when I walked into the studio, Dante was at his desk.

I set my camera bag in my chair and shrugged off my jacket. "I thought you had something scheduled this afternoon."

He glanced up from his screen. "Fucker cancelled at the last second."

Fucker indeed. "That sucks. Did he at least reschedule?"

"Yeah, for next week." He leaned back and reached up to stretch his arms. "Which means I'll be busy as hell, since I'm booked solid all week."

"Let me know if you need me to pick up any appointments," I said. "I'm pretty light next week."

"I may be taking you up on that."

"You know where to find me."

He grinned. "Indeed I do."

I threw back a halfhearted smile, then went down the hall to our makeshift break room—a large closet into which we'd crammed a table, microwave and minifridge—and grabbed a soda. My hips and back ached when I leaned down to get the Pepsi out of the refrigerator. Wasn't like I needed any physical reminders of last night, since that had been at the forefront of my mind all damned day.

I popped open the can and leaned against the wall while I took a drink. *I should get back to work. Lots to do. I think.*

I sighed. Might as well hide in here for a little bit. I couldn't focus on anything anyway, not while my mind was stuck on last night.

Last night. Last night. Last night.

My heart had beaten that cadence into my ears all damned day like a song stuck in my head. I'd tried to ignore it, tried to focus on anything and everything else, but finally I just closed my eyes and let

the song play.

Last night had left me unsettled. Truthfully, I'd had that feeling for a while now, that growing knot of uncertainty I couldn't quite explain. Like alcohol amplified whatever mood I was in when I drank, everything that had happened in that room tightened that knot. At least the liquor would have worn off by now and I'd have gone back to my regularly scheduled emotions. Now, in the light of day, out of my bed and in my clothes, that knot pulled tighter, sank deeper, and burned hotter.

Everything about last night had been amazing. Double-teaming with sex and wax. Keeping Jordan's orgasms out of his reach. Fucking each other one last time for good measure after Jordan left. Every moment was hot, and every moment was seared into my consciousness.

It was one thing to watch Dante topping another sub. There were few things in the world hotter than watching him bend someone over and fuck him good, hard and fast. But something about watching the two of them last night had me off-balance. I wanted to be jealous when I replayed the parts when Dante had fucked Jordan. Jealousy would have been easier to stomach than helplessness. Maybe that wasn't even the right word, but I couldn't think of anything else to call it. That feeling of sitting back and watching something happen that I couldn't stop.

It wasn't just the fact that Jordan let Dante fuck him or that Jordan was a submissive. He offered the power and the surrender Dante and I both craved, and I wouldn't have denied my boyfriend that submission any more than he'd have kept it from me.

What bothered me was realizing that Jordan gave Dante something more. Not just what I couldn't or wouldn't offer, but something for which Dante had always come to me and me alone. The fact was, Jordan was everything I couldn't be for Dante, and slowly but surely, if I read the two of them right, he was becoming what I had always been.

In my mind's eye, I saw that look again. That long look that meant their world had narrowed to then, there and them.

I knew that look. Dante was in love with Jordan.

I took a long drink of Pepsi, telling myself it was just the carbonation that made my eyes sting and water.

Fuck, I wanted to be furious. I wanted to be jealous. Confront him. Accuse him. Throw down the cheating card and lay into him for breaking our most sacred rule.

But I couldn't.

I set down my soda. Sighing, I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. I'd do as well throwing any accusation I threw at Dante at the

mirror instead. Ignore it, deny it, pretend it hadn't happened, but it had.

I loved Jordan too.

Not in a fleeting, butterflies-in-the-stomach, impulsive infatuation kind of way. I was in love with Jordan like I'd only ever been with one other man, never mind falling this hard.

Still rubbing my temples, I sighed. Now what?

We'd considered a permanent sub if one ever came along, but this wasn't what either of us ever had in mind. I never expected to fall in love with anyone but Dante. I'd certainly never expected both of us to fall for the same man.

I couldn't change how anyone felt, but eventually something would have to give, and I'd never imagined being this afraid of losing two men I loved this much.

I'd think of something. No idea what but something. For now, I had work to do. At least, I was pretty sure I did. The only time I'd been able to focus today had been with a client breathing down my neck, and I didn't have that luxury right now.

I'd figure it out, I supposed. Didn't have a hell of a lot of choice, did I? I drained my drink and headed back out to the lobby.

On my way, Dante and I passed each other, but he stopped me with an arm around my waist. "You okay?" he asked. "You've been kind of spacey today."

"Yeah, I'm fine." I forced a smile.

"You sure?" He narrowed his eyes like he could see right through me, and he probably could. "Even Phoebe said you've been a bit off all day."

I gestured dismissively. "Just tired. After last night."

"I can certainly understand that."

Dante, you don't have a clue. Trust me.

"A night like that's bound to take a lot out of us." His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and for the first time, I noticed the dark circles under them. His fatigue matched my own, reminding me yesterday really had happened. He was there. I was there. *Fuck*.

"Guess we should get back to work," I said softly.

"We should." He kissed me lightly, and the guilt and self-loathing burned a little hotter. *I'll think of something*, I told myself again.

Quitting time arrived and not a moment too soon. I still had a few things to square away at the studio and I took my sweet time, so by the time I left, Dante had already taken off. I was glad we'd taken separate cars this morning, since we both had places to be outside the studio throughout the day. I could only avoid him for so long, especially once we got home, but maybe twenty minutes or so in the car would give me a chance to gather my scattered thoughts.

It didn't help. Pulling into the garage beside Dante's car, I was no closer to working out how the hell this had all happened or what the hell to do about it.

While we made dinner, Dante tried to get our usual flirting and bantering going, but I just wasn't feeling it. He backed off and didn't ask. I knew he wouldn't. He'd long ago learned that if I kept him at arm's length to just let me be; I'd come around and talk to him when I'd sorted it in my own head.

Tonight, just once, I wished he'd break that unspoken rule and ask what was on my mind, because I just didn't have the guts to bring it up. I wished he would, but he didn't.

After dinner, I worked at my desktop for a while instead of my laptop. There were a few things I could do only on this computer, so it gave me a convenient excuse to work somewhere other than the living room. Still, even with my music playing in the background, I couldn't escape the gentle click of fingers on keys in the next room, a constant reminder he was there beside my empty place on the couch.

I rested my elbow on the desk and my forehead in my hand, absently petting Jade with my other hand. None of this was going to get resolved one way or another with the two of us in separate rooms. I didn't know how much we'd solve in the same room, but this would fix exactly nothing.

Fuck it. I couldn't take it anymore. I turned off my computer and stood. Jade purred a little louder, kneading the edge of her bed. I scratched her ear, then went into the living room.

Ignoring the knot in my stomach, I leaned over the back of the couch and slid my hands over Dante's shoulders, lacing my fingers together across his chest so they wouldn't shake.

He smiled at me. "Hey you."

"Hey." I kissed him lightly.

"You sure you're okay?" he asked. "Still just tired from last night?"

"Yeah, just a little tired." I was sure he could feel my heart pounding, but hoped he bought the casualness of my one-shouldered shrug. "And a bit preoccupied, I guess."

He reached back to lay an affectionate hand on my arm. "Being a workaholic again?"

"Something like that." *Nothing like that.* I kissed him again to derail the conversation. "You staying up for a while?"

He glanced at his computer, then leaned his head back and met my eyes again. "Are you going to force me to stop working?"

I laughed. "Well, I was going to suggest going to bed and—"

He shut his laptop. I released him so he could stand, and as soon as there was no longer a couch between us, we were in each other's

arms. Kissing and stumbling over each other's feet, we inched toward the bedroom.

"You're not too tired after last night?" he murmured between kisses.

I need this because of last night. "Oh, I think I can find some energy with the proper motivation."

"Hmm. Proper motivation?"

"Mm-hmm."

He groaned against my lips when I stroked his cock through his jeans.

"I was thinking," I said, my heart thundering so hard he *had* to have felt it, "tonight, I…" The words got stuck in my throat.

"Hmm?" He kissed my neck and slid his hands under my shirt. "Tonight…?"

"Would you be game for…" I swallowed and had to force my throat to cooperate. "Switching?"

Dante raised his head. "Are you serious?"

For you, anything. I nodded.

"You know I won't turn that down." He drew me closer and kissed me lightly. "Are you sure, though?"

No. I forced a smile. *No. No. No.* "Of course."

He growled something I didn't understand and kissed me again. He held me tighter, kissed me harder, and I hoped I hadn't just set us both up for disappointment. He wanted this. Had wanted it for a long time.

Please, please, let me be able to give it to him.

We quickly got out of our clothes and into bed. Dante reached for the nightstand, and never in my life had the sight of a lube bottle made me so nervous. He set a condom beside it, and I gulped.

"Since it's been so long, I'll take it slow," he whispered. "Just fingers first."

We adjusted our position so I was on my side with my back to him, and at least that meant he couldn't see me closing my eyes this tight. Part of me wanted to ask him to just get it over with, but maybe if we did take it slow, I'd be okay with it. I hoped with each slow, gentle stroke, the intensity would diminish. It wasn't painful, but it wasn't pleasant either. I chewed the inside of my cheek, breathing slowly and deeply.

I could do this. For Dante, for Dante, for Dante.

"Relax," he whispered. "Am I hurting you?"

"No, not at all." At least that much was true. It didn't hurt.

His finger slid deeper. I winced, hoping he wouldn't sense it, knowing he would.

He kissed my shoulder. "You doing okay?"

Closing my eyes, I nodded.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Just go slow."

"I will. I am." He was. He did. Then he added a second finger, which pushed the sensation that much closer to unbearable. Fuck, how would I be able to handle his cock? Even when he found that sensitive spot and pressed his fingertips against it, the white-hot pleasure wasn't enough to tame the discomfort. I breathed, I relaxed, but I just couldn't force myself to enjoy it. I wanted to. I needed to.

I couldn't.

I exhaled. "Wait."

He stopped. "What's wrong?"

"I…"

"Angel?"

I closed my eyes. "I can't do this."

"You sure?" There was nothing but concern in his tone.

I hesitated. I wanted so badly to do this for him, but…I couldn't. I just couldn't. Finally, I nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry, Dante, I—"

"It's okay." He kissed the back of my neck and slowly, gently, withdrew his fingers. "We've been through this. It's not for everyone."

But it's definitely for Jordan. I forced the thought to the back of my mind and turned on my other side so we faced each other.

Dante wrapped his arms around me. "Plenty of other things we can do, just like always." He kissed me, and while he did, my mind replayed what he'd said, scrutinizing every word in search of the faintest note of disappointment. I found none, but that didn't let me release my breath.

Grinning, he rested his weight on one arm and held up the condom. "We should still find something to do with this, don't you think?"

Returning the grin even though I didn't feel it, I took the condom. "Oh, I think we can manage that." I set the condom on the nightstand and gently pushed Dante onto his back. "Not yet, though." I kissed him before he could say a word, and he gasped and held me closer when I reached between us to stroke his cock.

"Oh, my God, Angel…" A long moan finished the thought.

I let go of his cock and started to move down, but he caught my arm. "No, stay here," he said. "I liked what you were doing." With a hand on my wrist, he guided my hand back to his cock and whimpered when I wrapped my fingers around him again.

"Please," he whispered, coaxing my hand into motion. I squeezed gently, biting my lip when he closed his eyes and shivered.

"Like that?" I asked.

He nodded. He released my wrist and brought his hand up, sliding

it into my hair to draw me down into another long kiss. I stroked him faster, harder, squeezing and releasing just the way I knew he liked it. He moaned against my lips, and his fingers dug into my shoulders. His entire body tensed, then again, and his lips left mine in the same instant semen hit my abs and forearm. He released a cry that was almost a sob, and I kept stroking until he begged me to stop.

"Fuck me," he breathed. "Please, Angel, I want you to fuck me."

"With pleasure."

While he grabbed some tissues off his nightstand, I reached for the condom and lube on mine. He started to get up, but I put a hand on his shoulder.

"No, stay just like that."

"You sure?"

I nodded. "Yeah." *I want to see your face*.

He sank back to the bed. "I'm not going to argue with that."

"Didn't think you would." I winked and quickly rolled on the condom. Once it was in place and I'd put on enough lube, I moved over him again.

I guided my cock to him and pushed in gently. All the while, I watched his face. His lips were apart, his brow furrowing over tightly shut eyes. When I pulled out a little, then slid deeper, he bit his lip and moaned. God damn it, he was gorgeous, and I realized we didn't make love this way *nearly* often enough.

Once I was all the way inside him, I found a steady, even pace; slow, but still enough to arch his back and quicken his breathing. I couldn't take my eyes off him, couldn't stop looking at him even when my vision tried to blur. Twelve years, and I never tired of watching his face while I was inside him. No matter how I felt about Jordan, no matter how Dante felt about Jordan, I couldn't imagine losing *this*.

"Look at me, Dante," I whispered, and he opened his intense blue eyes. I held his gaze until he reached up and touched my face. Drawing me down to him, he lifted his head off the pillow and kissed me. The tip of his tongue slid past my lips. I thrust deeper. His breath mingled with mine. My skin prickled with goose bumps. His nails bit into the back of my neck.

And I lost it.

He let go of my neck, and I threw my head back, a violent shudder driving me into him once, twice, a third time, before I collapsed over him. I buried my face against his neck, inhaling his scent as I caught my breath.

"Fuck, I don't know what's gotten into you tonight, but…" He blew out a breath and when I pushed myself up on my arms, he wiped sweat from his brow.

Grinning in spite of the worries on my mind that weren't yet

settled, I said, “Just horny.”

“Whatever it is, I like it.” His humor faded, and—*yes, yes, he did*—he looked at me just like that. Eyes locked on mine, looking up at me, looking *into* me, and nothing else existed. Still breathless, words still slurred, he whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

And I hoped to God that was enough.

Chapter Twenty

Jordan

Since Angel and Dante were getting ready for a wedding tomorrow and would be busy this evening, I made plans to grab a cup of coffee with my sister. Once my lessons for the day were done and every horse I'd needed to work had been worked, I drove down to the café we'd been going to for years. By the time I got there, she'd already snagged a table, so I ordered my coffee and joined her.

"So, how's married life?" I asked.

She shrugged. "The same as unmarried life, except I keep forgetting how to sign my own name."

I laughed. "You could have kept your maiden name, you know."

"Oh, Christ." She groaned. "Paul's parents would have had heart failure."

"All the more reason to do it."

"I know, that's what I thought." She shrugged again. "But, it really wasn't a big deal to me, and it was one less area for them to pester us."

"It's your name," I said. "Quite frankly, it's none of their damned business."

"I know, I know." She sighed. "Anyway, it's done. So are you still trying to kick Eli out?"

"Yeah." I avoided her eyes and lifted my coffee cup, stopping just short of my lips. "He's still 'working on getting' a job." I took a sip. "Don't know how much effort he's putting in, though."

"Throw him out on his ass. That'll motivate him."

I scowled. "I can't do that to him."

"Why the hell not?"

"He's broke, Jen," I said. "Where would he go?"

"How is that your problem?"

"Okay, I know, it's not my problem, but I'd still feel like a dick if I threw him out on the street."

"You *are* a dick."

"Shut up," I said, chuckling into my coffee.

She grinned. "Anyway, seriously, he's had plenty of time to find someone gullible enough to hire his sorry butt." She sat back, idly curling and uncurling the corner of her napkin. "I've offered a million times to inflict him on some of my clients, and as far as a place to live, he's got other friends, and don't his folks live around here?"

"They do, but they've already told him he's not living with them again."

Jennifer gave me a pointed look. "And that doesn't give you a

monstrous clue that he's taken advantage of too many people already?"

"Yeah, it does." I sighed. "I just, I don't know. The thought of him being homeless…"

"He won't be homeless." She made a dismissive gesture. "He'll couch-surf for a while until he finds someone dumb enough to put him up in the long term."

"Gee, thanks."

"You know what I meant." She sipped her coffee and set the cup down with a delicate clink. "I'm ready to go in there and kick him out myself, to be honest with you."

"Be my guest," I said.

"I'm serious." She leaned forward, brow creased with concern. "He has no business sticking around after the way he's treated you."

"Yeah, I know."

She kicked me under the table. When I winced and cursed, she said, "You keep saying that, but you keep letting his dumb ass live in your house."

I rubbed my shin and glared at her.

Jenny sighed. "Listen, he's the only person on God's green earth who's ever been able to walk all over you, and I don't understand why you just lie back and let him."

"I did dump his ass."

"Which means, what?" She took another sip and set the cup down a little harder this time. "He's sleeping in another bedroom, but otherwise things are exactly the same?"

"Actually, you'd be pleased to know that I've been turning him down every time he asks me to go grab dinner or hang out with him or—"

"He still asks?" She made a disgusted noise and rolled her eyes. "God, I don't know which of you is thicker in the skull. Him for not getting a clue, or you for not booting him out."

"A little from column A, a little from column B," I muttered into my coffee cup.

"My point exactly." Her tone softened. "I just don't like seeing him walk all over you. That is so not you."

I nodded. "Believe me, I know."

"So throw. Him. *Out.*" She sighed. "Besides, you need to move on. You know, find some other guy to make you miserable."

"Funny you should mention that, actually."

One pencil-thin eyebrow shot up. "Oh?"

"Well, not that someone's making me miserable, but…"

She folded her arms behind her coffee cup on the table. "Do tell."

"I've kind of been seeing someone."

"Kind of?"

My face burned and I bit my lip. "Remember those photographers you had at your wedding?"

"Dante and Ryan? Of course." Her jaw dropped. "Wait, wait, wait. You scored one of those two? Oh, you lucky fucker."

I chuckled and picked up my drink.

"Funny, though," she said. "I could have sworn those two were together."

"They are."

She blinked. "Jordan Steele, you're not having an affair with one of them, are you?"

More heat rushed into my cheeks. "*One* of them? No."

Jenny shook her head slowly, staring at me in utter disbelief. "You're with…both of them?"

"Sort of." I hesitated, not quite sure how much I wanted to divulge to my little sister. "It's, um, complicated."

"Well, good, then you can put that as your relationship status on Facebook. Now define complicated."

I took a deep breath. "I don't think you need any TMI about my love life, so let's just leave it at complicated."

She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, good call. God, you fucking bastard. Scoring both of those gorgeous men?" She made a disgusted noise, then sipped her coffee again. "So how long are you going to do the 'complicated, too gross to tell your sister' thing with them before you start thinking about chasing down a relationship?"

That gave me pause. It was just a casual relationship, of course. A sexual one, not an emotional one. Sooner or later, as these things always did, it would end. They'd ride off into the sunset. I'd go find someone for something less complicated and more permanent. In a way, I suppose I'd known that from the start, but now that I actually gave it some thought—

"Jordan?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, honestly."

She furrowed her brow. "What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

"You were just joking and being all coy about them, and now you're all down in the dumps." She inclined her head. "Something I said?"

Exhaling, I sat back in my chair. "I hadn't really thought that far ahead, I guess," I said softly.

"Well, it's not like you'll be doing these guys forever, right?" She grinned. "Though I wouldn't blame you if you did."

I laughed, but it was forced. On some level, I guess I knew in the beginning this arrangement was temporary. Now, the thought of life

without Angel and Dante didn't feel right.

Probably just because they're easier to deal with than Eli, I thought bitterly.

"Jordan." My sister's voice was sharp enough to startle me.

"Sorry, what?"

She stared at me. "You're really hung up on these guys, aren't you?"

Sighing, I shrugged. "I don't know, maybe. I think I'm just enjoying being with someone who isn't Eli."

"More like two someones who aren't Eli."

"Exactly."

"I don't know how you do it, honestly."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Being the third."

"Well…" I fought a losing battle against a laugh. "You see there's this position called—"

"Jordan, shut *up*." She closed her eyes and shuddered. "Don't. Want. To. Know."

"You started it."

With another shudder, she glared at me. "What I meant was, being their extra. Like, their toy. I don't know if I could handle being the disposable one."

Something in my gut dropped. "What do you mean?"

"How long have they been together?"

"Like twelve years, I think. Thereabouts."

"So, if things went to shit between the three of you, who do you think would be the first to go?"

I chewed the inside of my cheek and stared into my coffee cup. Of course I'd known that, but hearing it stated so bluntly and matter-of-factly engraved it into my consciousness. It was true. She was right. She was absolutely right.

I tapped my fingers on the side of the cup. "It's not exactly intended to be anything long term, though. It's not a…relationship. In the traditional sense."

She was quiet for a moment, furrowing her brow and looking down as if trying to decide whether or not to take another sip of coffee. Then she met my eyes again. "Listen, I know this is none of my business, and the baby sister isn't supposed to be giving the big brother advice, but…" She paused. "I'm worried you're setting yourself up to get hurt."

"I don't think that's going to happen."

"Sure about that?"

"We all went into this knowing it's just something—"

"No details," she said quickly.

I chuckled. “I wasn’t going to give you details. I was just going to say we went into this knowing it was something casual. No commitments, nothing emotional.”

My sister threw me a skeptical glance. “Uh-huh.”

“What?”

“Answer me something.” She looked me straight in the eye. “If they called you tonight and called the whole thing off, how would you feel?”

I chewed my lip.

“Maybe that’s the wrong question.” She narrowed her eyes a little and cocked her head. “Let me ask you this.”

I raised my eyebrows.

She pursed her lips, folding her hands under her chin and resting her elbows on the table. “Is it really just ‘too gross to talk to your sister about’ stuff? Or is there a little more to it?”

I shifted in my chair. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you…” She trailed off, searching my eyes. Then she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Are you in love with them?”

I’d taken a pair of hooves to the chest a few years ago, and that didn’t knock as much air out of me as Jenny’s softly spoken question. Sitting back, I stared up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to make some sense of the fragmented thoughts she’d stirred up in my head.

This was the point when I *should* have been asking myself if I did love them. Was this more than sex? Was I in love with them? Everything that had happened since that first night in their studio flickered through my mind like black-and-white photographs: alone with Dante. Alone with Angel. All three of us. Their house, my house, their studio, anywhere. Pushing boundaries, testing limits, hot wax, hot sex.

And the intimacy. Good God, the intimacy.

I didn’t ask myself if I was in love with them, though.

Of course I was.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and sighed.

Jenny reached across the table and put her hand over my wrist. “Jordan?”

“I don’t know what I feel for them.” *Oh, I do. I know exactly what I feel for them.* Swallowing hard, I shook my head and lowered my hand to squeeze hers gently. “It’s supposed to be just…” I forced a quiet laugh. “Just ‘too gross to talk to my sister about’ stuff.”

She laughed too, but it was halfhearted, and the sympathy in her eyes told me I was wearing more of my feelings on my sleeve than I’d intended.

“I’m not going to pry, and you don’t have to justify it to me,” she said softly. “But promise me you’ll be careful with this. I don’t want to

see you get hurt again."

I nodded. "I will. I am being careful with them, I promise."

"Good." She gestured with her coffee cup, then stood. "I'm going to get a refill. You want anything?"

"No, I'm okay, thanks."

"Wasn't going to get you any anyway."

I smacked her playfully as she walked by. Once she was gone, I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead.

I hadn't lied to her. I'd be careful with them, and I'd been careful all along. At least, I thought I had been. Shit, how the hell did this happen? *When* did it happen? Thinking back, I couldn't remember when I started feeling this way. I couldn't remember *not* feeling this way. Not that it mattered, because I couldn't have them like that. They had each other, and I'd have sooner cut off my own arm than try to split them up.

Fuck. I hadn't gone into this to find love, but damn if love hadn't, with the worst possible timing and in the worst possible place, found me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dante

"What the hell is Ryan's problem today?" Troy asked in a hushed voice while we changed out battery packs and memory cards.

I shoved a memory card into my camera. "Go make sure the groom's side of the family is ready to roll. I'll be out in a second."

He hesitated, probably wondering why I'd ignored his question, but rather than pressing the issue, he did as he was told. He left the room, making an obvious effort not to limp in spite of his sore feet. Still wearing uncomfortable shoes, still suffering through but wisely not choosing today to bitch to me about it. Smart kid.

I double-checked my battery pack, then pulled my tux coat over it. With a quick check in the mirror to make sure I was presentable, I left the room to join Troy and the groom's family in the gardens behind the church. The bride and groom had to be kept separated before the ceremony, so at this point, we had to take care of all of the portraits and group photos with each half of the couple. We'd already gotten family, friends, in-laws and wedding party with the bride; now she was being sequestered somewhere else in the church while we set up to do the same shots with the groom.

I caught up with Troy out in the garden. Angel already had the family members lined up and posed, and he gave directions while he and Phoebe snapped away. At least he gave the appearance of being in a pleasant mood. The last thing we needed was for a guest or client to catch on.

"He had everyone started when I came out," Troy said.

"We're on candid detail, then." I gestured around to the left side of where the family posed. "You hang around over there. I'll stay to this side." We split up, and I let Angel handle the formal portraits while I searched for those "little moments": a flower girl peering at her tiny bouquet, her brow furrowed with intense concentration. A smile passing between the matron of honor and her husband. The mothers of the bride and groom sharing a laugh.

Before long, Angel wrapped up the formal portraits. He and Phoebe picked up their gear and went in to get ready for the ceremony. Troy and I hung back for a few minutes, catching some more shots of guests milling around and socializing before we too went inside.

This particular church had a choir loft overlooking the sanctuary. Since Phoebe and Angel were situated behind the pews down below, I went up to the loft with Troy.

While Troy and I took a few quick readings with the light meters,

Angel looked up at us. Even from this far away, the irritation in his expression was visible in the tightness of his lips and narrowness of his eyes. Then he turned away, shifting his attention back to whatever he and Phoebe discussed.

I gritted my teeth. Angel had his moody days like anyone else, but usually a few cups of coffee and a distraction—such as, say, a wedding to shoot—was enough to melt the ice. Today it just got worse as the day went on. I had no idea when it had started. I'd left for the studio before he was even out of bed, as I often did on wedding days, and from the moment he'd arrived, he'd given off "leave me the fuck alone" vibes. So I'd left him the fuck alone, but even that didn't seem to help.

I shook my head. Whatever. We had a job to do. The personal shit could be sorted later.

As the ceremony wound down, I sent Troy downstairs to wait for the bride and groom outside the sanctuary doors. I stayed up in the loft, shooting until the couple was about halfway up the aisle, then made a quick, discreet exit to join him. I made it with about three seconds to spare, and had my camera up and ready just when the doors flew open.

On the way out to the gardens for more group photos, Angel fell into step beside me.

"You might have mentioned you were going up to the loft," he growled, his voice low enough to keep the icy undercurrent between us.

"One of us always goes up," I snapped in an equally quiet voice. "Since you and Phoebe were already set up down below, it only made sense for me to go up."

"I figured you'd come down and touch base before you made the decision." He glared at me. "I would have sent her up with you, since she needs some experience shooting from that kind of vantage point."

"Then you should have said something to me or sent her up to trade with Troy." Before he could say anything else, I said, "Can we argue about this later? Maybe when we don't have to pretend to be professionals?"

"Fine," he snarled with the kind of venom that said I *would* hear about this later.

Christ, just what I needed. The stress of a wedding with a looming argument hanging over my head.

"*What the hell is Ryan's problem today?*" Troy asked in my head.

"Your guess is as good as mine," I muttered to myself.

We made it through the wedding without biting each other's heads off. If anyone besides our assistants had caught on to the tension between us, they hadn't let on. Pissed off or not, we were both

damned good at keeping a professional façade going when there were clients around, and for the most part, we kept everything on the down-low. We maintained a pleasant, professional front around our clients and their guests. When we spoke to each other, it was behind closed doors, terse and strictly business. No pleasantries, no flirting, and no fucking clue what his problem was. Maybe he was just in a pissy mood, but the frosty shell around him seemed to pertain only to me. It was a barrier past which I was *not* invited.

All day and all evening long, everything I did raised his hackles. When I told him the portraits of the couple would be at the south end of the garden instead of the north end like before, he hadn't said a word, but his icy demeanor had just about wilted both our boutonnières. Sending Troy and Phoebe to get a few shots of the rented white Rolls Royce was a mistake for some reason. I even managed to pick the wrong time to go out to my car for a cleaner copy of the invoice and a quick gulp of water.

By the cake-cutting and bouquet toss, I was ready to throw my hands up. I probably could have gotten the punch stain out of the matron of honor's dress, repaired the damage a toddler's roving hand had done to the wedding cake, miraculously healed the bride's wheelchair-bound grandmother, and *still* been on Angel's shit list.

This wedding ran every last one of us ragged. It was nonstop, constantly on our feet, all four of us being pulled in twelve different directions. We'd all grabbed enough to eat to keep from passing out, but it wasn't nearly enough. Normally, we'd have agreed on a fast food place and stopped as a group for a late-night super-value heart attack.

Tonight, Troy and I left while Angel and Phoebe were still packing his car. We always left gigs at the same time, but I made an exception tonight. I needed to get out of this place, away from him, and some food in my system before Angel and I had it out in front of God and everyone. For the sake of everyone within a three-block radius, I got the hell out of there.

Before we went back to the studio, Troy and I stopped to eat. I was starving but could still barely finish mine. Thankfully, what little I ate was enough to dull the ache between my temples. My assistant, usually chatty to the point of annoyance, was chatty tonight to the point of merciful distraction. I listened with interest about the courses he'd enrolled in next semester, the decrepit Mustang he'd been trying to fix up for three years, and his brother's recent culinary school mishap that had resulted in twelve stitches. At least *someone* was speaking to me today.

After we'd eaten, we returned to the studio. Phoebe and Angel were unloading his car. With all the equipment still in the trunk, they

must have just gotten started. They must have made a similar stop on the way back. So much for buying us some time.

No one spoke while we emptied the cars. Phoebe and Troy probably felt like two mice between two snarling cats. They swapped a few wary glances when they didn't think I noticed, which made me feel guilty as hell. I promised myself I'd apologize to them on Monday and bring peace offerings of coffee and doughnuts. For tonight, I just gave them a quick escape.

"Why don't you two call it a night?" I said. "We can put everything away."

Phoebe looked like she was about to insist on staying, but her eyes darted over my shoulder toward Angel, then returned to me. "Okay, I'll see you guys on Monday."

Troy followed suit. I didn't know if he'd caught on that now was a good time to make himself scarce, or if he was just ready to get out of his uncomfortable shoes after a long day, but he high-tailed it out of there with Phoebe.

As soon as they were gone, I turned the deadbolt on the studio's front door, and the click sounded an awful lot like the bell in a boxing ring. When I turned around, Angel was out of sight, but his tuxedo coat was draped over his desk chair, and the uncharacteristic haphazardness—one lapel tucked underneath, the opposite shoulder barely over the top of the chair—made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

In the other room, something slammed shut with a lot more force than was necessary.

I took a deep breath.

Let the games begin.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Angel

"So are you going to tell me why you've been so pissed at me all day?"

I looked up from putting gear away. Dante stood in the doorway, blocking my only escape, with his arms folded across his chest and *that* look in his eye.

"Let's just get all this shit put away and get out of here," I said.

Dante didn't move. "I don't really want to take this home, to be honest."

"And I don't particularly want to hash it out here."

"Well, I want to know what the fuck I was doing wrong today." Jaw set and shoulders taut, he stepped onto the set between us, into the brighter light so I could really see the fury in his features. "Every move I made was wrong. Everything I did was wrong." He up put his hands. "What the fuck?"

"Are you going to tell me why you didn't bother giving me a heads-up about anything all day?" I shot back. "Seemed like you were making all the decisions, so—"

"Well it wasn't like I was getting more than two-word answers out of you."

I focused harder than I needed to on coiling an extension cord around my hand and elbow. "You might have said something about taking the family portraits on the opposite end of the garden," I growled. "Every fucking time we shoot a wedding in that place, we do it by the fountain."

Dante shrugged. "The bride wanted it by the trellis. Or should I have asked her to hold that thought while I ran it by you?"

"All I'm saying is that a heads-up would have been nice before Phoebe and I had to drag everything back over to the other side of the damned garden."

"Take that up with the bride," he snapped. I dropped the coil of cord onto its shelf and started for the battery packs from today, which were on the opposite side of the room. Dante went on. "For that matter, you've been shooting daggers—" He paused. "Angel, stop. Just stop. Please."

I stopped and turned around, facing him across the rumpled muslin.

He took a breath. "You've been shooting daggers out your eyes at me all damned day." Dante pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled sharply. Then he threw up his hand. "Is this even about the wedding, or are you pissed at me for something else?"

I flinched like he'd punched me, and he may as well have. Shifting my weight, I stared at the floor between us, tapping my fingers on my arm just to channel my nervous energy into something.

"Angel, you've been cold-shouldering me all day." His tone was slightly gentler, but still edged with irritation. "What did I do?"

The fury in my chest, that knot that had been tightening all day long, receded in favor of the lump rising in my throat. Guilt and worry twisted and turned in my gut.

Raising his eyebrows, Dante inclined his head enough to change his expression from interrogative to inquisitive.

I broke eye contact and ran a hand through my hair. God damn it, I'd spent all day hiding behind misplaced anger. I wasn't angry with him. I hadn't been angry with him at all, and I'd known that from the get-go. It was just easier to grind my teeth and keep my hackles up instead of letting him see everything else that was on my mind. A wall of ice and barbs seemed like the safest bet to get me through the day in one piece, but now that I faced him, that wall came down and it came down hard.

Much more of this and I'd break down with it.

"Angel?"

I cleared my throat but didn't meet his eyes. "I'd rather discuss this at home."

Before he could protest, I brushed past him. He didn't reach for me. Didn't try to stop me verbally or physically. Walking away and giving him the cold shoulder again was the last thing I wanted to do. It certainly wouldn't get us closer to resolving this. But I just needed some fucking time to get my wits about me.

I turned the deadbolt and shoved the door open. When it banged shut behind me, I half expected it to open again. Cringing, I listened for the hurried beat of dress shoes on pavement to accompany my own.

The door stayed closed. No footsteps joined mine.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Dante knew me well enough to know when I needed some time to cool down, just like he knew me well enough to know the wedding had nothing to do with why I was pissed off. I just needed a little space, a little time, then we could calmly and civilly sort it out. That's how most fights went, anyway. I wasn't sure this could be settled so easily.

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, mind going in a million different directions. I was a block away when I realized I hadn't put my battery packs on the charger. Three blocks when I realized I'd left my jacket on the back of my chair. A mile and a half before I remembered the check from the bride's father was still in my wallet.

I couldn't muster the energy to give a shit, though, so I just drove. Rubbing the back of my neck with one hand, I sighed. There was nothing quite like a wedding—all stress and romance—to inflame the nagging worries in my head.

While the headlight-illuminated stripes blurred past my car, my mind wandered back to a sweltering morning on the other side of the world a decade and some change ago. One second, I was kneeling in the dust, adjusting the aperture to get a more interesting depth of field on a stack of hand-woven baskets. The next, someone bumped into me, and I had half a heartbeat to be annoyed that he'd jostled my camera before I lost my balance and we both tumbled onto our asses.

Once we'd made sure our cameras were undamaged—priorities, of course—I'd stood, dusted myself off and tried to be irritated with this idiot tourist who'd broken my concentration. When I offered my hand to help him up, though, I could tell by the camera he wasn't just some idiot tourist. And when I met his eyes, I didn't care if he *was* an idiot tourist. My God, he was gorgeous. Though I didn't believe in love at first sight, in that moment I certainly believed in *lust* at first sight.

Appropriately enough, given how we'd just met, we stumbled through awkward introductions and apologies. Eventually, we reached the point where we'd been polite, laughed off our little collision, and could continue our days, assignments and lives in different directions. And we…didn't.

New Delhi hustled and bustled around us, but the world may as well have ground to a halt while we talked cameras, the assignments that had landed us there, and where we came from. At some point, we'd started walking, and we kept right on talking. The awkwardness diminished. We got the hang of interacting like we weren't bashful schoolboys, at least until we parted ways that evening. Neither of us was particularly shy by nature, but we also couldn't *quite* work up the nerve for that first kiss.

At least I'd managed to choke through a red-faced "I'd like to see you again", and the next morning, we'd met up in front of my hotel. Then he'd shown me the little rundown restaurant that would get me forever hooked on curry, and that afternoon, I'd taken him to a particular temple that had intrigued me. Sometime around sunset, he'd snapped a photo of that temple, the image that would later be his first sale to *National Geographic*.

And after the curry and the temple and the picture and the sunset, Dante had finally kissed me.

It was three days after we met before I realized I never did get that picture of the baskets. It was two days after *that* before I finally worked up the nerve to ask if he wanted to come back to my hotel room.

By the time the sun went down the fifth night, I knew. Gun-shy though I may have been after my divorce and a few failed relationships, I knew. There was no doubt in my mind as we went through the desperate if slightly awkward motions of two lovers in bed for the first time. One way or another, we were in this for the long haul.

Sure, one of us would eventually have to move to another state unless we wanted to do the long-distance thing forever. We both traveled a lot, sometimes in opposite directions. We had the earliest inklings that we were both Doms who didn't switch. All of those were bugs that could be worked out. Lying in bed in a hotel room in India, the existence of "us" was a foregone conclusion.

In the years that had come and gone since that night, we'd built a life together. We'd moved and traveled thousands upon thousands of miles. We'd bought and sold a few cars and a couple of houses in between having all the ups and downs every couple has. Submissives had come and gone.

Twelve years, a business partnership, and one particular submissive later, uncertainty found me.

I blew out a breath and tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. My feelings for Jordan made me physically ache with guilt. Dante's feelings for him scared the hell out of me. The fact was, Jordan was something Dante needed that I wasn't. Something I could never be.

Habit and muscle memory guided my car from the studio to the house. I opened the garage door, pulled in and turned off the engine, all simple, familiar movements I did without thought.

Dragging my feet, I went into the bedroom to change out of my tuxedo.

Dante would be along eventually. Knowing him, he'd kill some time at the studio. Then maybe he'd go drive around for a bit to gather his thoughts, which left me time to try to gather my own.

After I'd changed into something more comfortable, I parked on the couch with my cat and laptop. Still running on autopilot, I went through shots from a recent commercial shoot, adjusting color and contrast, cropping, watermarking, things like that. It required just enough focus to numb my mind. Work was the workaholic's anesthetic, and I dove right in.

Until the garage door opened, anyway.

The rumble was faint, but I knew the sound because my pulse was conditioned to jump a few notches whenever I heard it.

Like the chickenshit I was, I put on a pair of headphones and turned on my iPod. I kept them on when he came into the living room and sat back with his own laptop. I desperately needed to talk to him, and God, I wanted to, but I wasn't yet ready to.

I'm not being passive-aggressive, I wanted to tell him. *I just don't know how to look you in the eye and say what's on my mind*.

How much of this was my inability to find the right words and how much was nothing less than fear of the outcome, I couldn't say. The solution to this situation should have been simple. Just stick to the rule we'd put into place when we'd started bringing in submissives: if it starts becoming more than sex, break it off with the sub. We loved having submissives, craved the things only they could give us, but not if that came at the expense of our relationship.

That was the simple solution, but there were factors in place that made it complicated. I couldn't deny I was in love with Jordan. Painfully so. More than that, I had little doubt that Dante was too. And while I couldn't read Jordan as well as I could Dante, there were some strong feelings on Jordan's corner of this little triangle too.

I didn't want to lose Jordan. The very thought of breaking it off with him hurt like hell, but deep down I knew it was a necessary evil. I had to let Jordan go, because I *couldn't* lose Dante. In a perfect world, I could have had them both, but this wasn't a perfect world.

It wasn't that I felt pressured to choose between them. I knew we had to address this sooner or later, and something was going to have to give for the sake of our relationship, but I was afraid to ask Dante to give Jordan up. Whether or not he'd ever admit it, I knew it would hurt him, and I physically ached at the thought of asking him to give up the connection he had with Jordan.

Above all of that, my fear—that deep, gnawing fear that kept me awake at night and encased in ice today—was that Dante and Jordan would choose. That was why I was so fucking terrified to bring this up to Dante.

On the other side of the couch and a world away, he tapped and clicked, oblivious to me watching him from the corner of my eye. Like me, he had on headphones, and we both listened to something that wasn't each other.

It was up to me to re-establish communication. I'd been the one to cold-shoulder him and walk out. He'd tried. The ball was in my court.

I wanted to scream with frustration. We weren't like this. That was why our relationship worked so well. We talked. We talked about everything. We had this communication thing down. After all, our relationship was semi-open and we were into kink; there was no way we could function without that level of communication.

And tonight, when we needed to talk more than ever, we both froze. Well, I froze. He was probably fuming because I'd been at his throat all day for no apparent reason.

Fuck, we needed to talk. There were no two ways about it, and no matter how uncomfortable the conversation was guaranteed to be, it

needed to happen. But where to start? *How* to start? I suddenly felt like I had that first evening in New Delhi, when I just couldn't quite work up the nerve to make a move.

Eventually, Dante got up, shut his laptop and went into the bedroom. A minute later, the shower turned on.

Sighing, I closed my own laptop and decided to call it a night. Maybe now wasn't the time to deal with this. We were both exhausted from the wedding. It was a safe bet he was pissed at me for sniping at him all day, and I didn't blame him.

We had tomorrow off. No clients, no plans, nowhere to be. Plenty of time to talk things over and figure out where to go from here.

All I had to do was find the words.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dante

Though it had been a long, exhausting day, Angel was restless that night.

Not that I could sleep either, but I just stared up at the ceiling. Beside me, he tossed and turned. Even Jade got tired of it after awhile and left, dropping to the floor with a thump and wandering out of the bedroom.

We hadn't said a word to each other since he'd stormed out of the studio, leaving me with a knot in my gut and a murmured "oh shit" hanging in the otherwise empty air. I'd taken my time getting out of the studio, triple-checking things that didn't really need to be done until tomorrow. Or next week. Or…whenever. Then I'd taken the long way home. Just for good measure, I'd stopped to put gas in my half-full tank, hoping every minute I stalled would give him some time to cool off, and maybe give me some time to figure out what the hell I'd done to piss him off.

The only thing I could think of was Jordan. Maybe Angel had caught on to what I felt for Jordan. He was just waiting for me to tell him what he already knew, and my God, the guilt ate at me. I needed to tell him. I couldn't lie to him.

From the time I got home this evening, neither of us spoke to each other. Maybe he was afraid to bring it up, or maybe he was still fuming about something else. Whatever it was, we didn't touch it. I was afraid to ask if our situation with Jordan was really on his mind. Almost a decade and a half together, and this was one conversation I did *not* know how to have with him.

So we avoided each other all evening, hiding behind laptop screens and fending off conversation with headphones, and now, here we were. Lying in the place we'd made love hundreds of times. Not speaking, not sleeping.

Every time he moved, my heart sank a little deeper. Angel was always restless, always moving, but I could always settle him with a touch. And now, I couldn't. I didn't know if my touch was welcome. If I could be the cure when I was the cause.

The mattress shifted slightly, the near-silent accommodating of shifting weight filling the taut stillness. The shared sheet moved an inch or so across my chest, just another reminder we were under the same covers even if we were on other planets. I didn't have to look to know his back was to me.

And still he fidgeted. His foot moved under the sheet. Back and forth, *hiss-hiss-hiss*. That stopped. A moment later, the faint vibration

of tapping fingers made it across the mattress to me. Silence. *Hiss-hiss-hiss*.

Fuck it. Not reaching for him now was killing me. Let him pull away.

Holding my breath, I turned onto my side and reached through the darkness until my fingertips found him. His foot stopped. My hand rested on his arm. His body stiffened. My heart pounded.

I made slow, gentle arcs with my thumb across his warm skin. He was still now, but tense. Barely breathing. I held my breath, waiting for the tension to tilt in favor of either “come closer” or “back off”.

Then he exhaled.

And relaxed.

I inched closer until his skin warmed my chest. Dropping a light kiss on his shoulder, I moved my hand down his arm to his hand, and just as I’d hoped, he splayed his fingers to let mine slip between. Squeezing his hand gently, I kissed the back of his neck, and his sharp intake of breath gave me a little more hope that he wouldn’t push me away.

I wanted to ask if he was okay. I wanted to whisper “I love you”. But words didn’t feel right. There was so much we needed to discuss, but at least for the moment, I just needed to know he was still here.

I gave him enough room to roll onto his back, then I was over him again. He wrapped his arms around me, and even the darkness couldn’t keep my mouth from finding his. I tried a few times to break the kiss, but he held the back of my neck with *please don’t go* insistence, so I didn’t. I held on, let him hold on, and we just kissed in the silence.

Eventually, I shifted my weight onto one arm and let my free hand memorize him like I’d never touched him before. His hands moved too, sliding over my skin and running through my hair.

I couldn’t tell if we were simply moving slower or if time itself had slowed down. All I knew was how acutely aware I was of every way we moved and every place we touched. The grooves between his muscles guiding my fingertips up his abs. The whorls of his fingerprint scuffing across my stubbled jaw with the crackle of a vinyl record between songs. The almost silent thrum of his voice against my lips. Every twitch of his fingers in my hair as they played out some internal debate between stroking and grabbing.

Our breathing fell into synch, and so did every move we made. We mirrored each other as if we could see each other. I ran my hand down his side in the same moment his palm slid over my rib cage. Coarse stubble gently abraded my fingertips as soft fingertips grazed my own cheek. His hand dipped beneath the waistband of my shorts at the same time I slid my hand into his.

And simultaneously, we separated to get boxers off. Fabric hissed over skin. My heart thundered in my chest—arousal, relief, arousal, relief—when the nightstand drawer rattled open. There was just enough light for me to make out his shadow as he sat up, presumably to put the condom on. I reached for the lube bottle, which was on the corner of the nightstand, exactly where he always put it.

I poured some lube onto my hand and joined him on the edge of the bed. While I stroked the lube onto his cock, he sought my mouth again, and time once again slowed down, this time to the speed of a long, languid kiss.

The kiss deepened. My hand coaxed time back into motion with progressively tighter, faster strokes, and Angel's breathing quickened. Then he put a hand on my wrist, a silent *stop*.

I didn't have to ask, and we didn't speak. We moved, knowing without knowing, just doing. The bed shifted and creaked beneath us, and when Angel knelt behind me, I bit my lip as a shudder of anticipation rippled up my spine.

He pressed against me, and I exhaled, willing myself to relax completely so he'd meet no resistance, and he met none. White sparks flickered around the edges of my vision as he pushed in slowly, gently, perhaps savoring this as much as I did. He withdrew, then slid deeper inside me, taking long, slow strokes. I rocked back against him, not dictating the speed, just complementing the way he moved, and oh God, he felt incredible.

Maybe the darkness would have let a less honest or less devoted lover pretend he was with someone else, but I couldn't have mistaken him for anyone if I'd wanted to. The sound of his breathing. The way he ran his hands up and down my sides while he took those deliciously long, smooth strokes. That low growl that came from the back of his throat when he moved a little faster. It was all unmistakably and perfectly Angel. My Angel. I closed my eyes. Here in the darkness of our familiar bedroom, we were back in that sun-drenched Indian hotel, making love for the first time, when I knew I'd found the man for me, and to this day, that hadn't changed.

Resting his hand on the bed beside mine, he leaned down, his chest warming my back as his other arm wrapped around me. I put my hand over his and he kissed the back of my neck. He moved from the hips, taking slow, uneven strokes, but I didn't care if he went fast or slow. He was against me and over me and inside me, and all of that mattered more to me than an orgasm.

Angel slid all the way inside me and stopped. He kissed my shoulder and the back of my neck. I turned my head, and in the darkness, his lips met mine. We kissed like that for… I couldn't say. A while. A long while. At least until my neck started to cramp, and

though I didn't say a word, he must have known, because just before it would have become too uncomfortable to ignore, he broke the kiss and sat up. He withdrew, and as soon as I turned around, he put his arms around me. His kiss was gentle but passionate, confident but still somehow seeking reassurance.

Tell me you're still here.

I'm still here if you want me to be.

He pulled away again and leaned toward the nightstand. More lube, I guessed, and I was partly right. A click was my only warning before soft light met my dark-adjusted eyes. I blinked a few times.

Then our eyes met.

You're still here.

I'm still here.

We pulled each other into another long, deep kiss. With my body weight, I guided him back, and together, we sank down to the bed. More time passed us by while we just held each other and kissed, and we just let it pass. There was no hurry to do anything but be here. At some point, I even forgot we'd been having sex at all; the only thing I could think of was how much I wanted to touch and taste him and let him know that yes, yes, I was still here. It was only when he reached past me for the lube that I remembered what we were doing.

Angel put a little more lube on, then I got on top and lowered myself onto him. I rose off him, came back down, rose again, and while I did, he reached between us with one hand and gently stroked my cock. With the other, he drew me down to kiss him. Physically I couldn't have gotten any closer to him, and still it wasn't enough. Hot skin, cool breaths, the musky scent of sweat, low moans between kisses, his face whenever I could open my eyes and see through the blurry intensity. His kiss, his hands, his cock, his breath, his body, and none of it was enough.

A vague ache worked its way into my back from staying in this position so long—riding him while leaning down to kiss him—but it was nothing compared to the more powerful ache within.

God, I love you, Angel.

He stroked my cock in time with the rise and fall of my hips, and I rode him in time with his breathing and my own. With a gasp, I broke the kiss, and I touched my forehead to his as something inside me came undone, came unwound, and I struggled to keep some semblance of rhythm. I couldn't let go of enough air to tell him how good he felt, how amazing he felt, *oh God, oh God, Angel, don't stop…*

Then he made the intense more so with a long, helpless whimper, an upward thrust, and the pulse of his own orgasm deep inside me in the same instant I let go. Hot semen hit my chest and abs, most likely his too, and after a moment, we each gave one last shudder.

And it was over.

I collapsed on top of him. We didn't move. We just held on to each other and panted between gentle kisses.

Finally, I raised my head just enough to speak.

"I love you, Angel."

A ragged breath whispered across my lips, and I couldn't help thinking it felt an awful lot like a sigh of relief.

"I love you too," he murmured, and like his exhalation, his breath contained an unsettling note of relief. Before I could ask, he kissed me again, and held on a little tighter this time.

My throat ached. Fuck, the guilt.

Angel, Angel, I'm right here. I've always been here. I'm not going anywhere.

Eventually, we pulled ourselves away from each other long enough to get rid of the condom, clean up, and return to bed. The light stayed on, and for a while, we just looked at each other.

I stroked his hair and finally managed, "What's wrong?"

He avoided my eyes and released his breath.

"Angel, talk to me."

He sighed. Then he sat up, so I did too. I put a hand on his back and waited while he searched for the words in his wringing hands, the creases in the blanket, something on the other side of the room.

Finally, he drew a deep breath and met my eyes. "It's about things with Jordan."

Guilt wrapped around my spine, threatening with every breath to become visible, assuming he hadn't already seen right through me. Assuming he didn't already know. "Okay…"

Swallowing hard, he held my gaze. "We've always had the rule about not getting involved with submissives. Emotionally, I mean."

Oh, shit.

"And we've always stood by that." He paused. "I've always trusted you, you've always trusted me, and I've *always* done my damndest to not get involved like that."

Fuck. Fuck. Oh, fuck, Angel, I'm sorry…

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. I hoped he didn't feel the way my hand tried to shake against his back, but I was sure he did. I chewed the inside of my cheek. The accusation was coming, working its way to his lips and into the air, and when it came, I owed him only truth. No denial, no sidestepping.

"Dante, I…" He exhaled and finally forced himself to meet my eyes. "I love him."

The words shoved the breath out of my lungs. In disbelief, I stared at him. Relief had only just begun to cool the guilt in my blood when he spoke again.

"And I know you do too."

My mouth went dry. Then I took a long, deep breath and nodded slowly. "Yeah. I do."

Angel dropped his gaze, his cheek rippling and his jaw tightening.

I touched his arm. "I do, and it's been killing me, because I felt like…"

He turned back toward me and whispered, "Like you were cheating?"

Ouch. Another nod.

"Me too." He brushed a few stray strands of hair off his forehead. "I've been wanting to tell you; I just didn't know how to say it. Any of it."

"I know the feeling, believe me."

Angel exhaled hard and shifted his gaze away again. For as much as he'd been relieved to hear I loved him earlier, there was not nearly as much relief now that I'd admitted I loved Jordan just as he did. He'd known the latter, but my God, hadn't he known the former?

I put my hand over his on top of the blanket. "Angel, this doesn't take away at all from how I feel about you."

Almost imperceptibly, he flinched.

"What's wrong?" I squeezed his hand. "What aren't you telling me here?"

He bit his lip and stared at our hands for a long moment. "There's…" He paused, swallowing hard. "There are things he does for you that I don't. Things he can give you that I can't."

I lifted his chin so he looked at me. "Angel…"

He moistened his lips. "I can't be a submissive for you, and I'll never enjoy having you fuck me the way he enjoys it."

"I know."

"And he's not crazy neurotic like I am," he said. "I mean, come on, I know you get tired of that shit."

I smiled and kissed him lightly. "We both have our annoying habits. What couple doesn't?"

He avoided my eyes. "Maybe so, but when there's someone else in the picture who doesn't have those annoying habits, and also has more to offer—"

"Angel, he's not you."

With some effort, he met my eyes. "And no matter how much I'd love to be, I'm not him."

The ache in my throat intensified. I brushed the pad of my thumb across his cheekbone. "I don't want you to be him. I've been perfectly happy with you all this time. That's not going to change."

"You were happy with me before he came along." He blinked a few times, then looked me in the eye again. "But what about now that

you know what it can be like with him? Now that you've experienced *him*, am I enough for you?"

"Of course you are," I said. "I wouldn't trade what we have because of a few things in the bedroom."

Angel chewed his lip. "Except things with Jordan have gone beyond just a few things in the bedroom."

"Yeah, they have." I wanted to tell him I could never love someone like I loved him, but was that a lie? Guilt gnawed at me. The way I felt for Jordan didn't detract at all from what I felt for Angel, but it wasn't something I could easily dismiss either. I was just afraid neither of them would understand that.

Angel went on. "The fact is, he's something I'm not, and I'm scared to death I might lose you because of that. What if Jordan is the best of both worlds for you? Something I can't be?"

I swallowed. I'd been so afraid he'd be hurt and angry that I felt this way for Jordan, but his fear that I'd even think of walking away from him cut to the bone and deeper.

He wasn't done. "I've been worrying about this for a while, and—" His voice cracked. "The fact is, Jordan's everything you ever wanted that I can't be."

I cupped the sides of his neck in both hands. "No. Jordan's the submissive I always wanted. And I do love him. But you're everything I've ever wanted, Angel. We knew from the beginning that we're both Doms. We knew that wouldn't make things easy. There would always be something we couldn't be for each other."

He put his hand over mine. "But we didn't know from the beginning we'd ever fall for a sub. Especially both of us."

"I know." I kissed him lightly. "Dom or sub, I couldn't be happy without you, though. No one will ever be one hundred percent perfect for each other, but you're as close as anyone ever could be. Otherwise, we never would have lasted this long."

Angel released a long breath. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know. I mean, if we cut things off with him, we all get hurt. If we keep going…" I shook my head. "Fuck, I don't know."

"I think we should talk to him." He brushed a few strands of hair out of his eyes. "One way or the other, I don't think we should play with him again until we've put this on the table. I don't think we should keep it from him, especially if we're still…involved."

"No, we shouldn't keep it from him." I hesitated. "But I don't know *how* to tell him, and I don't know where we go from here." I paused, not sure if I dared go down this road. "It's going to hurt all three of us if we let him go."

Angel nodded. "But maybe that's better in the long run. We're already in too deep, so—"

“So maybe we see how he feels, and go with it.” I squeezed Angel’s hand. “Maybe we can function as three instead of two.”

His posture straightened and he stared at me. “Dante, are you listening to yourself?”

“Of course I am.” I reached up and tucked his hair behind his ear. “Look, I don’t want anything to happen to what we have. I don’t want to hurt Jordan, and I don’t want you to get hurt. But if we cut him loose, we’re all going to get hurt.”

“And if we try to make this a trio instead of a pair…”

“It may work, it may not.” I rested my hand on the back of his neck. “He might not share the way we feel anyway.” Even as I said the words, I didn’t believe them. The kind of connection I had with Jordan wasn’t one-sided, and I’d seen the way he and Angel looked at each other. I cleared my throat. “It’s worth a try.”

“Is it?” Angel wet his lips. “And what if it doesn’t work out?”

“Then…we’ll deal with that when the time comes. But I’d rather at least see how things go than preemptively cut off something that could be incredible.”

“Unless we’re nipping something in the bud before people get hurt more than they need to.”

“Angel, you’ve been to the top of Mount Everest, you’ve walked into war zones, and you’ve jumped into a damned shark cage before.” I managed a cautious smile. “I’ve never known you to be the one to take the safe, easy route if it meant passing up the chance to take a risk for some kind of cool reward.”

A flicker of laughter lit up his face, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had come. “Yeah, I’m all for taking risks.” He swallowed, and his expression was completely serious now. “But I don’t gamble with our relationship.”

“I know you don’t.” I kissed his forehead. “But let me ask you this: do you want to cut him loose?”

Angel winced and dropped his gaze. “I don’t want to, no. I’m just not sure we have a lot of choice.”

I took a breath. “Angel, I don’t want to risk our relationship. I wouldn’t trade what you and I have for the world. But the way we both feel about him…” I trailed off, searching for the words.

Angel touched my face. “What?”

“The thing is, the way I feel about him, and the way I can tell you feel about him…” I forced myself to look him in the eye. “I can’t help thinking that if we cut him loose, we’d be missing out on something.”

“Well, we’d be missing out on having Jordan as our sub.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, as a relationship. All three of us.”

Angel stared at me. “You’re serious.”

I nodded.

"Dante, I…" He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I just don't see how we could."

We were both quiet for a long moment. Angel finally broke the silence with a barely whispered question:

"Could you be happy without him?"

That thought gave me pause, and that pause was enough to make Angel wince and turn away.

"Yes, I could be," I said. "But I won't pretend I wouldn't miss this. What we have with him."

Angel said nothing.

"What about you?" I whispered. "Answer me honestly, Angel. If we ended things with him, I know you could still be happy with me and I would be with you, but would you feel like something was missing?"

The flinch said it all. The long release of breath backed it up. And his eyes, when they met mine, left no room for doubt.

"Yes," he whispered. "I would." He swallowed hard. "I just don't see how it could work with him."

"If it could work, both of us being with him, would you want to?"

He shrugged. "If I could have you both, hell yeah. Best of both worlds."

"Then who's to say we can't make it work? Jesus, we've made a relationship work when we're both Doms, and that could have blown up in our faces a few hundred times over."

"True," he whispered.

"Listen, we've always said that, corny and cliché as it might be, we're as close to soulmates as anyone can get." I shrugged with one shoulder, hoping he didn't see how scared I was that I was somehow wording this wrong. "Who's to say we only get one?" I paused, drawing a breath. "What if you're mine, I'm yours…and he's ours?"

Angel sat back a little, his eyes losing focus and his brow furrowing slightly. "You really think something like that's possible? Making a three-way relationship work?"

"I don't think it's simple," I said. "But I see no reason to believe it's not possible. Not after the last few weeks, anyway."

"Good point," he whispered. "So what do you suggest?"

"I'll talk to him." I brushed my thumb over his cheekbone as I searched his eyes for doubts. "I'm going over there for a riding lesson tomorrow night, and it would probably be easier for him if it was just one of us. So he's not outnumbered."

"That makes sense," Angel said softly.

"We'll see what he says, and we'll figure it out from there." I tucked a few stray strands of hair behind Angel's ear. "If he doesn't

feel the same way, or he isn't willing to move forward as a trio, then you and I will move on. Just us."

He nodded slowly. "We can give it a try. See what he says." He looked at me through his lashes. "I don't know what will happen with him, but the one thing I do know is that I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to lose me, Angel." I kissed him gently. Grinning against his lips, I added, "Like it or not, you're stuck with me."

He was quiet for a second, but finally allowed himself to laugh. "Well, like it or not, you're stuck with me too."

I put my arms around him. "Oh, what a terrible thing."

"Isn't it?"

"Definitely. Now come here."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jordan

I knew as soon as Dante walked into the barn that something was wrong. The tension in his shoulders was visible from a mile away, and our eyes met for only a split second before he dropped his gaze.

"Everything okay?" I asked when I was close enough to speak without raising my voice.

Dante bit his lip. "I'd like to talk." His eyes darted around the barn aisle, which was still teeming with clients and boarders. "Someplace private."

My heart dropped into my feet. I chewed my lip, trying to think of a place where no one would overhear us. Noreen was in the office. Eli was in the house. Finally, I gestured out the door through which he'd come.

"Let's walk."

We did walk, and we did so in silence. We followed the fence to the closest to the middle of nowhere we could get on ten acres. Down by the river that divided my property from the next, in the six-foot gap between two pastures, I stopped. Out here, in the shade of the maples lining the riverbank, we were alone except for a few horses grazing nearby. There was no one around to overhear whatever he'd come to say. He hadn't said it yet, though, and the trickle of water over and around rocks emphasized the silence between us.

I leaned against the fence and rested my weight on one foot. I bent my knee and put my other boot flat against the post, hoping I appeared a little more relaxed than I felt.

"So, what's up?" I asked.

Dante leaned against the opposite fence, fixing his gaze on the tromped-down grass between us. "Angel and I have been doing some talking about a few things." He lifted his chin enough to meet my eyes. "About the three of us."

I tried to ignore the way my heart thundered against my rib cage. "Such as?"

He was quiet for a moment, once again staring into the middle distance. When he spoke again, he did so slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "Listen, we've done this a few times over the years. Taken a submissive, that kind of thing. Quite a few times, actually. And we've always stuck to our rules about maintaining some emotional distance. There has to be some intimacy, or the trust won't happen, but still…distance."

I nodded, dread coiling in the pit of my stomach. They knew, they knew, fuck, they knew.

Dante went on. “We’ve had these arrangements get complicated before.” He chewed his lip and ran a hand through his hair. “But…not like this.”

Tighter and tighter, it coiled. *Just say it, Dante. If you know, just say it.*

He took a deep breath and set his shoulders back. “I don’t quite know how to say this, Jordan, but…”

“Just say it. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

“We…we went into this because we wanted a submissive, but… we both…”

I cocked my head. Was he beating around the bush to soften the blow, or was he really having a hard time getting the words out? “You both what?”

“Angel and I…we…” Dante closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “We both love you, Jordan.”

Okay, so I was wrong about being able to handle it.

I managed to find some air to pull into my lungs. I cleared my throat. “What?”

Dante looked at the ground, then at me. Quieter now, as if to keep the horses or the river from hearing, he said, “We’re both in love with you.”

“You’re both…you…with me…” I shook my head. “You’re serious.”

Dante nodded slowly.

I took my foot off the post and rested it on the ground. Shifted. Put the other against the post. Still didn’t feel anywhere near as relaxed as I might have appeared. “Wow. I. That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

Dante gave a sympathetic nod. “I know. It threw us for a loop too.”

My heart sank deeper in my chest. “So, I suppose this is the part where you tell me we have to stop what we’ve been doing.”

He looked toward the river with unfocused eyes. “No. No, this isn’t that part.”

“So…”

“I know this sounds crazy. It sounds crazy to us too.” He shifted his gaze back to me. “But…we don’t want to stop.”

“And, what? Just ignore how we all feel?” My teeth snapped shut, but the truth had already slipped out. His eyebrows jumped. Trying not to notice the heat rushing into my cheeks, I coughed and said, “I mean, do we pretend this is all just physical, even if it’s obviously not?”

Dante shook his head. “Quite the contrary, actually. We don’t want to ignore it. We don’t want to stop it.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and blew out a breath. “Spell this out for me, Dante. Explain it to me like I’m stupid, because I’m having a hell of a time getting my head around it.”

He pursed his lips. “We want you as more than just our friend and submissive. We want you to be part of…us.”

I was too restless to stand still, so I pushed myself off the fence and paced. For a moment, the only sounds were the river behind me and the grass crushing beneath my feet.

I supposed this all should have taken some weight off my shoulders. Let me breathe a little deeper, unwind some of this guilty tension. It didn’t. This was the one outcome I hadn’t truly considered beyond some futile fantasizing, and now that it was reality, all I could think was *this is complicated. Seriously, seriously complicated*.

I met his eyes again. His eyebrows were raised, asking me to fill the silence that had fallen. I would have, but I had no idea how. What was I supposed to say? I didn’t know what to think, what to feel; I sure as shit didn’t know what to say.

Dante finally spoke. “Jordan, we’re not suggesting that this is simple or that it would be an easy adjustment. We’re suggesting it would be…” He frowned, pressing his lips together and, I guessed, searching for the words. I waited. After a moment, he raised his eyes again. “We’re suggesting it would be worth it.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You only stand to lose one of us. I stand to lose both of you if this doesn’t work out.”

He nodded. “I know. And I know I’m throwing a lot at you.”

“Oh, yeah, you could say that.” I exhaled hard. “And Angel, he’s, he’s cool with this?”

“Yes, he is. We had a long talk last night. I came alone today because we didn’t want to outnumber you.”

“Well, there’s a problem right there.” I stopped pacing. “If I went along with this, I’d always be outnumbered.”

“No, you wouldn’t. The three of us would be on level ground. Equal thirds.”

“On paper, maybe. I don’t see how it would work in practice.”

He let out a breath. “Have we ever made you feel like anything less than an equal part of this?”

“I’ve never been a part of your relationship, though. An equal part of this arrangement, yes. But that was something we all went into together. This…what you’re suggesting…it…” I rubbed the back of my neck and cursed under my breath. “I’ll always be the new kid. I could see something like this maybe working if we’d all just met, but this? How can I be an equal player when I’m this late to the game?”

“The fact that we just met you isn’t something that can be helped.”

“But it’s a fact.” I struggled to find the words. “As is the fact that I don’t like the idea of being the expendable one.”

Dante blinked. “What?”

I shifted my weight, jamming my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “If shit hit the fan between the three of us, and there was just no way to make this work out, say, if Angel and I decided we didn’t get along anymore. What do you do, Dante?”

He dropped his gaze, but not before he flinched. Equal parts hurt and anger tugged at my gut. I didn’t quite understand it, why I was angry, but I was. But then, I didn’t understand a damned thing about this, so why not throw some inexplicable emotions into the churning, acidic mix?

“Jordan, it’s not that simple,” he said softly, and I could have sworn he sounded like my question hadn’t just thrown him off but hurt him.

“Yes, it is that simple.” I forced my voice to stay even, and damn it was hard. “I’m the new guy. I will always be the new guy. If something happens, I—” I stopped when my voice cracked. I cleared my throat. “I can’t be someone’s second choice.”

There was no doubt I’d hurt him then, not when his lips tightened into a thin line and he turned away. He had to have known it was true, that there were simply factors in place that none of us could change, but that truth appeared no easier for him to swallow than it was for me.

Running a hand through his hair, he took a deep breath. “Listen, I can’t help that I met Angel first. Yes, we have over a decade of history. That’s only because it took us that long to find you.” He paused. “That doesn’t mean either of us loves you any less just because you were the last to come into the picture.”

“That’s easy for both of you to say now.” Christ, it hurt just to say it. “I’ll always be the third wheel. The one who’ll be kicked to the curb if things go south. I’d either be coming between the two of you, or I’d be the odd man out.”

He was quiet for a moment. Finally, barely whispering, he said, “What can I do to convince you we don’t see you as the odd man out? That we would never want you to feel that way?”

“I don’t think you’d want me to feel that way. I don’t think you would ever set out to. It’s just…the way it is.” I wet my lips. “I don’t think the two of you would ever intentionally hurt me, but I don’t see how I could ever be on level ground with what you guys already have.”

Dante said nothing.

I rubbed the back of my neck again. “I just, I can’t see this not blowing up in our faces somehow.”

"It's a possibility," he said with a subtle nod. "It could blow up in our faces. Or it could be something we can't even imagine now. In a good way." When I didn't respond, he went on, his tone softer. "I'm not discounting what's at stake for you or any of us, Jordan. We both know exactly what we're asking from you, and we're not approaching this lightly."

I stared out at the river and land beyond. Whether or not he intended to discount it, could he even begin to imagine what I had to lose? If I could be openly in love with them, and know what it was like for the two of them to return it in kind, but then I lost it? Being with the two of them like that would be nothing short of paradise as long as everything was okay. If things went wrong—and they always did at some point in any relationship—where did that leave me?

Dante's hands rested gently on my shoulders, and I jumped. Not because he'd startled me—though I'd only been distantly aware of it, his approach had registered at the edges of my senses. It wasn't his nearness or his touch that had startled me, but the sudden ache in my throat when I imagined this being the last time he touched me.

He put his arms around me. I released my breath, relaxing against him and laying my hands over his.

"I know this is a lot to think about," he whispered, and I thanked God he didn't kiss my neck. "You don't have to give us an answer now." He paused, and I swore he held me a little tighter when he added, "We're not going anywhere."

He loosened his embrace, and in spite of being afraid to look him in the eye, I turned around. As soon as I faced him, my arms rebelled against my better judgment and wrapped around him.

"I'm completely serious, Jordan." He touched my face. "I do love you."

"I love you too," I murmured. The words came automatically. Easily. Freely. "Dante, I love you. I love both of you. But I…" I closed my eyes to avoid the beautiful scrutiny of his. "God damn it, I—"

He kissed me.

There was nothing sexual or even seductive about it. Just gentle contact, his hands touching the sides of my face with the same tenderness as his lips moving against mine. The way I'd *always* wanted someone to kiss me. Damn it, why did everything surrounding such a simple kiss have to be so complicated?

Dante broke the kiss, but not the embrace. "The ball's in your court," he whispered. "You know where we stand."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. "I need time. To think."

Nodding, he loosened our embrace but left me to break it. I did, and didn't look at him while I took a step back to make sure I didn't pull him to me again. The kiss still tingled on my lips, and the cool air

emphasized the warm ghost of his touch on my skin. We were back to distance and silence, the water rolling behind us and wind rattling through tree branches above us, but no words passing between us.

"This is…there's a lot…I…" I paused, releasing a sharp breath. "I just, I need some time. To…process all of this."

"Understandable." He chewed his lip. "Do you want me to go?"

No, no, don't go. Stay here.

But I needed some breathing room so I could think, so I told the lie with a nod, and that lie came to life with the soft crush of grass under one step, then another. The next was quieter. The one after that, quieter still. I stared at the grass between my own feet and didn't watch him leave.

When I was really and truly alone, I slumped against the fencepost again. I slid down until my elbows rested on my knees and rubbed my temples with my fingers, trying to manually work this all into my head.

"We want you as more than just our friend and submissive. We want you to be part of…us."

How could we make something like that work? How could I be sure I wouldn't be setting myself up to lose not one but two men?

I pushed myself to my feet and started back toward the barn. I needed to…to…go somewhere. Do something. Get the fuck away from here and this. I needed to think. I needed not to think. Fuck it, I didn't know what I needed to do, I just needed to *go*.

I slipped past boarders and clients in the barn, grabbed a bridle out of the tack room, and went to Bravado's stall. I took his blanket off and put the bridle on. As soon as we were out of the barn, I hoisted myself onto his back, and we couldn't get to the trail fast enough.

Down by the property line at the other corner of my land, there was an old bridge across the river. Instead of crossing the bridge, I took Bravado down to the riverbank and let him take a drink. As he always did, he pawed at the water, splashing like a little kid in a mud puddle. I just let him play, especially since the noise he made drowned out the trickling sounds around us that had been the backbeat to my conversation with Dante.

Pity it couldn't quite mask the whispers that still echoed in my ears.

"Have we ever made you feel like anything less than an equal part of this?"

"What can I do to convince you we don't see you as the odd man out? That we would never want you to feel that way?"

My conscience berated me for even throwing that point out there, but wasn't it true? There was no way I could compete with their rock-solid, decade-old relationship. I wouldn't want to. They had the kind

of love most people would cut off a limb to have, and I'd never dream of stepping between them. So how the hell could I *join* them?

I was so lost in my thoughts, I almost lost my balance when something caught Bravado's attention and he threw his head up. I grabbed his mane and shifted my weight to regain my balance, my heart pounding as the *oh shit, almost fell* adrenaline rushed through me.

Ears perked up and nostrils flaring, he snorted at something in the distance. I patted his neck.

"Easy, buddy," I said softly. "There's nothing there."

He snorted again. Scanning the landscape, I finally made out the two tawny shapes against a line of trees. I rolled my eyes.

"They're just deer, stupid." I steered him away from the riverbank and we went across the bridge. He kept throwing wary looks toward the terrifying pair of horse-eating deer that grazed menacingly about fifty yards away, but he forgot all about them when I gave him a gentle nudge with my heel. Obeying my cue, he burst into a canter and tore down the packed dirt path. Holding on with my knees, I leaned over his neck, squinted against the wind and let him run. He was one of my highly trained show horses, but we both let our hair down on the trails. It was one of my secrets to keeping him from getting sour like show horses often do. And damn if it wasn't a hell of an escape for me.

Up ahead, there was a decrepit fence that blocked one side of the trail. Bravado shifted gears, gaining a little bit of speed. I could almost hear him mentally calculating the strides between here and the fence, likely focusing just as much as I was. I eased my grip on the reins and leaned a little farther forward.

Three strides away.

Two strides away.

One stride away.

Liftoff.

He sailed over the jump and landed with ease on the other side. Patting his neck, I sat back and eased him to a trot, then a walk.

"Good boy," I said. He panted and chomped the bit, fidgeting a little as he walked. No doubt he wanted to run again. There were more potential obstacles along this trail, every one of which we'd jumped a few dozen times before. But I wanted him to walk for a few minutes. No sense wearing him out, since I intended to stay out for a while.

With no need to concentrate on an upcoming jump and no rush of wind past my face to distract me from the world, the world came back into focus.

I groaned. Fuck. This just wouldn't go away.

I had never been so confused in my life. Being with Angel and Dante was as natural and right as the words “I love you” slipping off my lips. I just kept going back to that deep-seated fear that we could never make this work the way they suggested. There would always be that reality beneath the surface, pulsing under my skin beside my heartbeat, that I was the third. The new kid, the add-on, the extra. That it would always be “them” and “me”, even when it was “us”. There would always be that line of demarcation, seared between us by twelve years of them before there was us.

But my God, I loved them. All the trust and the intimacy, all those conversations. The way they could be so gentle and so rough. The way they’d never made me feel like the outsider I was. Commanding, never belittling. Dominating, never domineering. How could I *not* fall in love with them?

“We’re both in love with you.”

“We both love you, Jordan.”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. It sounded so damned good, it came so damned easily, *but.* But, but, but. Always a god damned but.

I loved them as a couple, but also as individuals. I was just as in love with Angel as with Dante, and I was in love with the halves as much as the whole. I was their sub, and yet I felt their equal. We had a perfect balance. The only problem was the numbers. Three where there should have been two, and I would sooner have walked away than try to cleave them apart. And now, I had the chance to have them both the way I’d only dreamed of, but there was so much potential for disaster.

Pulling myself out of my thoughts, I looked around. The sun was getting low in the sky, so I needed to turn around and head back before it got dark. Bravado was fine for after-dark rides, but I did that only with a full moon and at least one other rider with me. That, and the bugs would be out soon.

Besides, if I rode long enough to truly clear my head, Bravado and I would both be dead of exhaustion before the end.

So, I pointed him toward the farm.

Once he was cooled down, blanketed and munching happily on his dinner in his stall, I whistled for Sasha and started up the path to the house. On my way up, another knot tightened in my gut. I desperately needed to sit for a while with a drink in my hand and my dog at my feet. Just some time to myself, staring out the window while I figured out the crap in my head.

But I didn’t live alone, and the other person in my house was home. I groaned to myself and continued up the path. I may have been confused about a few dozen things right now, but one thing was

for sure, and that was what I *didn't* want in my life anymore.

As I shrugged off my jacket in the garage and went into the kitchen, I thought about the three years I'd spent with Eli. I could have sworn I was in love with him at one point. Maybe in a way I still loved him. Hell, of course I did. If I didn't love him, I'd have thrown him out on his freeloading ass by now. Pity might have kept him under my roof for a couple of months, but not the better part of a year.

Comparing him to them, I couldn't imagine giving up what I had with them just because it was complicated. I didn't want to. If we could build some sort of non-traditional happily ever after with the three of us, if I could be sure my corner of this little triad was tattooed on and not just drawn in pencil, I would, I would, I would. But how the hell did we do it? Love was always a gamble. I'd lost before, as the footsteps coming down the hall reminded me, but the odds would be less than even this time.

Eli came into the kitchen. We exchanged muttered greetings.

What if I fell out of love with one of them, or both of them, like I had with Eli? What if they fell out of love with me? Or, worse, what if one of them wanted to leave the other for me? I didn't think I'd ever be able to sleep at night if I was the cause of that relationship falling apart.

"*We're suggesting it would be worth it.*" Dante's voice echoed in my mind.

I wanted to believe him. I really did.

"Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

Eli furrowed his brow. "You all right?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. Fine. Why?"

"Because you've been staring at that bottle of Coke for the last minute or so?"

I looked at the bottle in my hand. Couldn't even remember getting it out of the refrigerator or the still-empty glass out of the cabinet. I forced a laugh and shook my head. "Just spacing out, I guess." I poured myself the drink I didn't feel like drinking, then put the bottle away.

Skepticism furrowed his brow, but he didn't press the issue.

"How goes the job hunt?" I asked.

"Oh, you know." He gave a flippant shrug and popped open a beer. "The one I was hoping for didn't pan out, so…" Another shrug, followed by a sip of beer.

I gritted my teeth. "I assume you have other applications out there?"

With a somewhat sheepish expression, he shook his head. "Nah, I

really thought this one would work out." He took another gulp of beer, then set the can down. "But, remember my college buddy, Travis? He's working on this startup, and it sounds like a sweet deal. I just need a few weeks to—"

"Eli, stop." I slammed my glass down on the counter. "Just *stop*."

His lips thinned into a bleached line, and he waited for me to go on.

"Why are you doing this?"

He cocked his head. "Doing what?"

"Making excuses. Stalling." I made a sharp, aggravated wave with one hand. "Dragging your feet."

He mirrored my gesture, but his was out of defensiveness, not frustration. "I'm not dragging my feet, I swear."

"Oh, really?" I raised an eyebrow. "All this time, you've put in an honest effort but haven't found anything?"

"The economy sucks."

"Yeah, and yet I see 'Now Hiring' signs all over the place." I tapped my fingers on the side of my glass. "You could have found *something* in all this time. Why haven't you?"

"I've been trying."

"Look me in the eye and tell me you've put in an honest effort." I set my jaw. "Look me in the eye and say it."

He dropped his gaze. "Okay, okay, I—"

"Why not?" I was *so* not in the mood for this shit. Hell, was I ever in the mood for it? "What's the problem?"

His shoulders slumped. Then he sighed. "Because I don't want to leave."

"But it's over."

"Yeah, I know."

"So, what's the point of staying?"

"Because I don't want it to be over," he said sharply. "I'm sorry, Jordan, I just…I don't want this to be over."

"It's *been* over," I said. "For months. It's a little too late, don't you think?"

He said nothing.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep myself calm. "Did you really think that hanging around and freeloading off—"

"I haven't been freeloading," he growled.

Before I could stop myself, I gave a cough of sarcastic laughter. "Really? So you've been paying rent? Putting food in the refrigerator?" I gestured at his beer. "Buying the beer you drink three times as fast as I do?"

"Oh, pardon me for not having my own business and a god damned inheritance to live off."

I raised my eyebrow again, a silent, *did you really just go there*? He knew better than to tread on the subject of my parents' money.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean…" He blew out a sharp breath. "I know you work hard, Jordan."

"Yeah, you should try it sometime," I said through my teeth. "Listen, this has to stop. I need to move on, and as long as we're still living together, it's—"

"Oh, I don't think my presence has stopped you from any of *that*," he said. "You don't think I notice when *they're* here?"

"I don't think they're any of your concern." I glared at him. "Who I bring into my own home is my business."

His eyes narrowed. "Wouldn't you rather have one guy who can make you happy instead of having to resort to two?"

"Leave them out of this," I snapped, barely keeping a surge of white-hot anger beneath the surface. "You don't have the faintest clue what's going on there." *That makes two of us, at the moment*. "For that matter, if I wanted one guy who could make me happy instead of two, that would still leave you out of the equation." The words came out with more venom than I intended, and guilt tugged at my gut, especially when his jaw dropped.

"Jordan…"

I exhaled hard. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to…" I didn't? The hell I didn't. I was miserable when we were together, and I'd tried to let him down gently for months. The time for pulling punches was over. Looking him in the eye, I said, "I need to move on. Without you."

"Seems like you've done a fine job of that," he snarled.

Forcing myself to stay calm, I said, "I want my house back. I want my life back. And I don't want to feel guilty or awkward bringing a guy or two into my own house." I took a deep breath and set my shoulders back. "Which is why you have until the end of the month to move out."

Eli blinked. "What? Jordan, I can't get a place in a—"

"Not my problem. I've given you plenty of time to get it together." I folded my arms across my chest. "Now you have till the end of the month to get out."

"I need more time. There's no way I can do that."

I shrugged, refusing to allow myself the slightest twinge of guilt at my own indifference. "I gave you time. You didn't bother to use it. Not my problem."

He shook his head, then stared at me. "You'd really kick me out like that? With no job, no money and nowhere to go?"

"Well, how long am I supposed to support you and wait for your next get-employed-quick scheme to pan out before I say enough is enough?"

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it?” I shrugged again. “All I know is, you’ve been here long enough. I’ve given you more than enough time to get out on your own. And you just admitted you’ve been dragging your feet on purpose because you wanted to get back together with me.”

“Okay, okay.” He shifted his weight and swallowed nervously. “Just give me a little time, then. I get it, we’re done, it’s over. I’ll—”

“You have six and a half months.” I gave him just enough time to release a relieved sigh before I added, “Retroactive to the time I asked you to move out in the first place. Which leaves you about two weeks.”

“Fuck, Jordan, this—”

“You’ve had plenty of time,” I said. “This is it. I don’t care if you have to couch-surf or park your ass in a cardboard box. I’m done.”

He glared at me for a moment, and I didn’t know if he’d argue further, blow up at me or just give up. Finally, he stormed out of the kitchen, throwing a muttered “you’re an asshole” over his shoulder on the way.

I listened until the slamming door cut off his heavy footsteps. Rubbing my eyes, I took a long, deep breath. Well, that was one problem more or less resolved. There was a deadline. A cutoff. A finite end when he’d no longer be my problem and he’d be out of my hair.

Now I just had to figure out what to do about the two men I’d have sold my soul to keep.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Angel

Three days after he'd had gone to talk to Jordan, Dante's phone burst to life with Jordan's familiar ringtone. We glanced at each other. Then Dante picked up his phone off the coffee table.

"Hello?" Long pause. "I…sure." He covered the phone with his hand and turned to me. "He wants to talk. In person."

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Now?"

Dante nodded. "Here?"

The next nod was mine.

To Jordan, Dante said, "Do you want to meet us here or out somewhere?" Pause. "Yeah, yeah, here's fine. Okay, we'll see you then." He snapped his phone shut. "He's going to leave now, so he'll be here in half an hour or so."

I released a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "Guess we'll see what happens, then."

"Guess we will." He set his laptop on the coffee table and stood. "Since he won't be here for a little while, I'm going to go grab a shower."

I nodded but said nothing.

Before he left the room, Dante paused and leaned down to put his arms around me. "Whatever happens with him, we'll be okay."

"I know." I squeezed his hand. "I just want us *all* to be okay."

"Me too." He kissed my cheek. "We'll just see what happens. Not much else we can do."

After Dante had gone into the bedroom, I continued working on the photo on my screen. I told myself I was getting some work done while I had a little downtime at home, but who was I kidding? I just needed something to do while I waited. That was probably why Dante had gone to take a shower: something to do.

The faster my hands moved on the keyboard and mouse, the more I could convince myself they were steady. I wouldn't relax, though, until this was over and I knew the outcome.

Blowing out a breath, I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes. I'd been robbed at gunpoint three times while working overseas, and that was the closest feeling I could compare to this. That undeniable awareness of how much was at stake, how much I could lose in how little time.

Dante was certain we would be okay, regardless of what happened with Jordan. Either we'd go on with him, or we'd make do and move

on without him, which neither of us wanted to do. Still, I was more than a little nervous about all of this.

We'd crossed an emotional line that couldn't be uncrossed, and that rattled me right to the core. Even if we went on without him, we would never again be the Angel and Dante that had never known Jordan. Our relationship was watermarked with Jordan's name. Could we be happy again without him? And if he left, how long would his shadow stretch into our future? Where did we go from here if we went there without Jordan?

The guilt burned deep in my chest. Of course I could be happy with Dante and Dante alone. I'd been happy with him all this time. But I had been before I met Dante too. If things had been different and we'd parted ways, I supposed I could have found that happiness again.

The fact was, I couldn't crave wine I'd never tasted. Couldn't miss what I'd never known. Now I'd known both Jordan and Dante. They'd known each other.

And I didn't want any of us to have to miss each other.

I finally closed my laptop and put it aside. Right about that time, Dante came out of the bedroom, barefoot and shirtless with his damp hair freshly spiked. He looked good. He *always* looked good.

"You going to put a shirt on before he gets here?" I asked with halfhearted playfulness.

"Yes, I'm going to put a shirt on." He smiled and nodded toward the garage. "I was just getting one out of the laundry room." He stopped behind the couch and leaned down to put his arms around me again. "You okay?"

I sighed. "I will be once this is over."

"Yeah, me too." He kissed my cheek. "Hopefully."

I turned my head, and he met my lips in a long, gentle kiss before he continued on to the laundry room to put on a shirt.

About fifteen minutes later, almost exactly thirty minutes after he'd called, Jordan arrived. The circles beneath his eyes suggested he'd lost as much sleep over this as we had, but he still managed a shy, uncertain smile.

I hung up his coat while Dante offered him a drink, which Jordan declined. Pretending not to notice how tense the air was with the unspoken, I followed them into the living room.

I took my usual spot on the couch. Jordan took Dante's. Dante sat in the armchair closer to Jordan. Immediately, Jade appeared on the armrest beside Jordan, then bounded across his lap and into mine.

"Sorry about her," I said, petting her as she flopped down on my leg. "She has no manners." The three of us laughed, and the mood lightened a little, but it didn't last.

Taking a breath, Jordan shifted. "Okay, we all know what I came

to discuss, so there's no point in beating around the bush."

Dante cleared his throat and leaned on one armrest. "Well, you know where we stand. I assume you've given it some thought?"

Jordan nodded. He stared at the coffee table for a moment, chewing his lip, and I wondered if he had any idea how far his silence had driven up my blood pressure. *I need to know, I need to know, I need to know*.

Finally he took a breath and whispered, "I just don't know." He swallowed hard. "I…the more I think about it, the less sure I am about it."

"Which part aren't you sure about?" Dante asked quietly.

"All of it," Jordan said. "I mean, I know what I feel, but…" He sighed. "Here's the thing. I was Eli's doormat. He was in control, and I let him walk all over me. You guys have never done anything like that, but the way…this kind of…" He took a deep breath. "I need to know I'm on equal footing and am an equal part of the relationship. Not the disposable one who's added for a little spice."

Something in the pit of my stomach dropped. I fidgeted, disturbing my cat, and she left. Ignoring her, I said to Jordan, "Do you really think we'd use you like that?"

Jordan didn't look at me. "No, not…" He fell silent for a moment. Then he met my eyes. "Not intentionally."

I met Dante's eyes. Fuck, what did we say to that?

Dante swallowed. "There's nothing we can do to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that we want you to be a part of this—an equal part—except show you over time."

"And if things don't work out?" Jordan asked.

"There's never any guarantee they will," Dante said.

I nodded. "All we can do is promise you we're going into this with every intention of doing whatever it takes to make it work."

"I understand that," Jordan said. "It's not that I distrust the two of you or question your motives or intentions. Not in the least. I just can't help feeling like the odds are stacked against me."

Dante and I looked at each other. I didn't know what to say to that. Evidently Dante didn't either.

Jordan rubbed his neck and exhaled hard. "I'm not suggesting you guys have ever made me feel like I was a lesser part of this equation. But in the long run? The fact will never change that I came in really late in this game. I don't want to be the expendable one if shit hits the fan."

I took a breath and turned to Jordan. "Can I be completely honest about something?"

His eyebrows jumped.

I moistened my lips. "You're worried about being expendable,

but…you're not. The thing is, when he and I discussed this the night before he came to talk to you…" I paused, glancing at Dante before meeting Jordan's eyes. "I was scared to death he was going to choose you over me."

Dante flinched. So did Jordan.

Jordan shifted. "See, that's part of the problem too. I don't think I could ever sleep at night if I was the reason something happened to your relationship. What you guys have, most people would kill for something like that. I don't want to be what breaks that up."

"Dante and I are both well aware that making this into a triple is a risk," I said, almost whispering. "For our relationship with each other and our relationship with you. And it's not a risk either of us is taking lightly. We're willing to put our own relationship on the line because *that's* how much we want to be with you." I swallowed hard. "The reason I told you that, about my fear he'd take you over me, isn't because I'm insecure in my relationship with him. Especially now that he and I are on the same page. It's because *that's* how strongly he feels for you, and it's how strongly I feel for you. I'd just never seen him form a bond like that with anyone but me, and it threw me."

Dante nodded. "We wouldn't have suggested this if we didn't both feel strongly enough about you to take this risk."

Jordan dropped his gaze and swallowed hard. He watched his hands wringing in his lap. Finally, he said, "What about other people? Would we keep this a secret? Would you two keep me a secret?"

"Hell no," I said.

He raised an eyebrow, silently bidding me to elaborate.

I fidgeted. "Jordan, we're gay. A good chunk of the population already hates the ground we walk on. If a few more turn up their noses because we found once-in-a-lifetime love twice in a lifetime, well, fuck them. I'm not hiding it." *I'm just afraid to lose it.*

"Point taken." He looked down again, swallowing hard. "This is… It's a lot…"

"We know," Dante said. "It's a lot for all of us to get our heads around."

"And we don't have to get it all sorted this instant. It didn't happen overnight; we don't have to figure out all the answers overnight." Inwardly, I cringed. It was the truth, and I absolutely didn't want to rush this but sleep. I needed sleep. And sleep wasn't happening until this was sorted.

"Jordan, you've trusted us to be your Doms," Dante said. "Can you trust us enough to go into this knowing we do see you as an equal part of this? That we're approaching this with every intention of making it work for all three of us, not just Angel and me?"

Jordan was quiet for another long, nerve-racking moment. He

didn't look at either of us, didn't say a word, barely drew a breath. Finally, his Adam's apple bobbed, and his eyes darted back and forth between us.

"Would we be able to take things a day at a time?" he asked. "Just…see how things go?"

If he only knew the relief those words, tentative as they were, sent rushing through my veins.

"Of course," Dante said. "We wouldn't expect anything else."

Jordan went silent again.

My knee bounced up and down while my fingers tapped on my other leg. Too much nervous energy. Needed to release it. Needed to relieve this tension. Needed to *know*, damn it.

Jordan's fingers tapped on the cushion between us. That was when I realized he was watching my knee. Immediately self-conscious, I slowed it down, but hell if I could stop. Not with all this pent-up energy that needed to go somewhere.

Jordan lifted his hand off the cushion, and it hovered between us, hesitation written all over his expression. Then, tentatively, he put his hand on my knee. The heat of his skin through denim sent a flood of cool relief through my veins, and my leg stopped. So did my fingers. So did my heart.

For a moment, he stared at his own hand. At my now stilled knee.

I put my hand over his. When he didn't recoil, I squeezed gently. "I promise you, Jordan, we're not going into this lightly."

"I know." His voice was barely audible.

"It's your call," Dante said. "If you want to do this, say the word."

Jordan chewed his lip, staring with unfocused eyes at the coffee table. The hand on my leg twitched, as if he couldn't decide whether to leave it there or pull it away. Or if he wasn't sure it was his decision to make.

The penny dropped. This was the wrong approach.

With my heart in my throat and whatever courage I could muster from knowing he'd been the first to make contact, I moved a little closer to him. His eyes flicked toward the shrinking space between us, and he swallowed hard, but he made no effort to move away.

I reached for his face, and when my fingers made contact with his jaw, he closed his eyes and shivered. But he still didn't pull away.

"Why don't we put it like this," I said softly. "If you want me to stop, say the word." I leaned in slowly, giving him ample time to decide if he wanted me to continue.

He didn't tell me to stop.

I moved my other hand from my lap to his neck, letting it drift up into his hair.

He didn't tell me to stop.

My lip brushed his.

He didn't tell me to stop.

I kissed him. Pulling him closer, I deepened the kiss, and when he touched my face with a trembling hand, a knot unwound in my gut.

I broke the kiss and met his eyes. My heart pounding, I whispered, "Do you want me to stop?"

He moistened his lips. "No." He ran his thumb along my cheekbone and took a deep breath. "No, I don't want you to stop."

"Then I won't." I started to move in for another kiss, but he drew back slightly, so I froze. Panic tightened my chest. "What's wrong?"

He said nothing for a moment. He held my gaze, but there was something in his, something I couldn't quite read. My heart beat faster, faster, faster.

Then relief forced the breath out of my lungs when a hint of a smile curled his lips.

"I love you," he whispered.

More relief. I smiled. "I love you too." And he let me draw him into another long, gentle kiss.

While I held Jordan, I was vaguely aware of movement nearby. Jordan pulled in a sharp breath through his nose, and when I opened my eyes, Dante was behind him, kissing the side of his neck. Jordan moaned into my kiss.

I looked past him at Dante. For a fleeting second, our eyes met, and I grinned into Jordan's kiss. The only thing between Dante and me now was Jordan.

And he didn't divide us.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jordan

Angel's mouth against mine and Dante's lips against my neck was pure heaven. I tilted my head both to let Angel deepen the kiss and give Dante more access to my skin.

Dante nipped my earlobe. "So, would we have to twist your arm to get you to stay a while tonight?"

"If you two keep kissing me like that, you'll have to twist my arm to make me leave."

Dante's breath tickled my neck. "Don't think that'll be an issue. We want you to stay."

"Then I will." *I will. Yes, I will*. This was where I wanted to stay, and coming over here tonight, there'd been no question that I wanted to. It was only a question of whether or not I would. Or should.

Should I? That remained to be seen.

Would I? Oh, fuck yes, I would.

"Bedroom?" Angel murmured.

"You two lead," I said. "I'll follow."

Dante's lips brushed just above my collar. "That's what we like to hear."

As one, the three of us stood. They led me down the hall into their bedroom.

They didn't put me on my knees this time. There was no command to take each article of clothing off one at a time. We were all too desperate for that tonight. Everything had been said. All the emotions and worries laid out on the table. The barriers had fallen, the distance was gone. For the first time, they knew, I knew, and I could let my guard down and surrender to them with nothing to hide.

Dante pushed Angel's shirt over his head and threw it aside. Someone took my shirt off. I ended up with someone's belt in my hands for a second before I tossed it on the floor and went for Dante's shirt. Buckles. Zippers. Jeans. Boxers. Everything hit the floor, and when Dante and Angel were completely naked, my knees hit the floor too.

I descended on Angel's cock and sucked him hungrily, desperately. The only thing that kept my hand from shaking was my tight grip on him, and he groaned when my hand moved in time with my mouth.

Movement beside me told me Dante was nearby, and, still stroking Angel with one hand, I turned so I could suck Dante's cock. I alternated between the two of them, stroking one, sucking the other. Someone's fingers combed through my hair. Someone moaned. Knees shook, breaths caught, and oh, God, this was what I *lived* for.

I started to switch again, this time from Angel to Dante, but Dante stopped me with a gentle hand. I looked up.

"Stand up," he whispered. As soon as I did, he cradled my face in both hands and kissed me. Barely breaking the kiss, he said, "I want you to fuck me."

My knees buckled. Speech was lost on me and my useless lungs, so I just nodded.

Angel handed me a condom. While I put it on, he and Dante exchanged a long, passionate kiss, and I had to force myself not to watch them. It wasn't jealousy. Far from it. Quite simply, there were few things in this world hotter than watching those two men kiss.

And one of those few things was being inside Dante. When he climbed onto the bed and turned his back to me while I put lube on the condom, I thought I'd come unglued.

Steadying us with a hand on his hip and the other on my cock, I guided myself to him. I pretended not to notice the way his back arched before I'd even touched him. If he wanted this anywhere near as much as I did, we'd probably set the room on fire in no time flat.

I started to push into him slowly, but Dante was having none of it. Before I'd given him an inch, he rocked back against me, forcing me all the way inside him.

"Oh God," I said. I wanted to hold him against me and give myself a moment to get my wits about me. I wanted to start out slow, pace myself, give myself a chance to keep it together.

Dante, of course, had other plans. He moved back and forth, silently urging me to follow suit. Breathing as slowly and evenly as I could, I kept up with him, willing myself not to come even though he felt so damned good. If I'd learned one thing with them, though, it was how to hold back no matter how much I didn't want to, and as I fell into Dante's ever-changing rhythm, I stayed in control.

The sharp rip of tearing foil threw me off for a split second. I glanced to one side, and realized Angel was putting a condom on. When he reached for the bottle of lube, I had to clench my jaw and look away to keep it together. And of course, that meant looking right at Dante. Looking at his beautiful shoulders, narrow hips, and my cock sliding in and out of him at the precise speed he demanded. *Fuck*.

Closing my eyes, I took a few deep breaths. *Stay in control. Stay in control. Stay in control*.

Then the bed shifted slightly behind me. A hand rested on my hip. Then the other.

Oh, fucking hell.

Dante glanced back. He rocked against me, and once I was all the way inside him, he stopped, silently commanding me to do the same.

I held his hips and held my breath, knowing what was coming.

Knowing I'd be coming in no time flat if they made this any hotter.

Cool lube met my skin. Then pressure. Then…oh Jesus.

Angel's cock slid deeper. Dante started moving, pulling away, pushing back, and my hips—God damn them—followed suit, and I was fucking Dante, and Angel was fucking me, and I had never experienced anything so intense. Dante set the rhythm. My body fell into synch. Angel found a rhythm of his own, and every thrust had me inching closer to insanity. My senses were evenly divided and equally overwhelmed between being inside Dante and having Angel inside me.

Then Angel's lips brushed my neck. "You're not going to come, are you, Jordan?"

I groaned with frustration. The reminder I couldn't come made it that much harder not to.

Dante moaned, pushing back against me.

"He sounds like he's about to come, doesn't he?" Angel murmured in my ear. Then he laughed, and his breath tickled below my ear as he whispered, "Of course he's about to come. You're doing to him the same thing I'm doing to you. He feels the same thing you do. Watch him. Watch yourself fuck him like I'm fucking you." I knew looking down would just make it that much harder to stay in control, but Angel told me to, so I did, and I forced my impending orgasm back, but Angel's breath on my shoulder and his cock inside me and oh, fuck, my cock moving in and out of Dante…

I could barely breathe. *Don't come. Don't come. Fuck him faster. No, no, slower. Don't come. Don't. Fucking. Come*.

I tried to think of anything but the orgasm I couldn't have, but Angel made sure it was at the forefront of my mind.

"Don't come, Jordan," he whispered, his own voice faltering with that telltale unsteadiness. "I know how much you like being fucked, and how much you like fucking him, but don't you dare come yet."

Deep breath. Deep breath. Deep inside Dante, deep inside me, deep breath. Deep. Breath.

"Please let me come," I said, holding on to Dante's hips for dear life.

"Not yet," Dante said over his shoulder, moving his hips just fast enough to drive me insane.

"I know you want to come in him," Angel whispered. "Just like I want…like I want to come…in you." His breath caught, and I thought he cursed. Then, "I know you want to, because I know how good he feels like this." He kissed the side of my neck. "Just like you feel right now."

"Fuck…" I moaned.

Angel moved faster. So did Dante. Whether or not I wanted to, so

did I.

Deep inside Dante with Angel deep inside me, I was painfully close to letting go, but I didn't. I'd learned to ride this edge and could do it almost indefinitely. An orgasm was an orgasm, but when it followed their hard-earned permission, it was pure bliss.

I couldn't say how much time passed, but I knew I'd never ridden that edge for that long. I could come almost as easily from giving or receiving, but *not* coming from both at the same time? And with Angel whispering dirt in my ear? It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. But still I gritted my teeth and forced myself to last another second, another second, another second. *Do as you're told, wait for permission, wait for them, wait…*

"Like that?"

I struggled just to draw a breath, never mind speak.

"I asked you a question, Jordan."

I shivered. "Yes, I—"

Angel slammed into me harder, interrupting my attempt at speech. "Can't hear you, Jordan."

"Yes, I like it," I said quickly. "God, yes, I love it."

"That's what I thought." Then his breathing quickened. So did his thrusts. "Fuck, I'm getting close," he moaned in my ear. His fingers dug into my hips the way mine dug into Dante's. He gasped. "God damn it, you feel good…" He was right on the edge with me. Oh fuck, how was I supposed to hold back when he moaned like that, when he forced himself deeper like that, when he hit me inside *right* there, *right there…*

I groaned, pretending I could ignore the way my body demanded release.

"Oh, fuck…" Angel shuddered. "Holy…"

The helpless, nearly breathless sound he released was more than I could take, and thank God that was the same instant Dante whispered over his shoulder, "Come, Jordan."

I managed a single gasp, then forced myself all the way inside him. He kept moving, though, just like Angel kept fucking me right through his own orgasm, his rhythm falling apart while I fell apart, and I lost it and my whole world went white, and I had never experienced an orgasm so blindingly, painfully, amazingly *intense*.

Even when it tapered, when the splintered fragments of the universe started to fall back into place, I gripped Dante's hips with trembling hands, not sure if I'd ever come all the way down from this high, least of all far enough to be able to hold myself upright again.

Angel rested a hand on my hip and wrapped his other arm around my waist. He panted against the side of my neck, his breath cooling the sweat and making me shiver.

“I hope you don’t think you’re done yet,” he slurred.

The words made my breath catch. I closed my eyes as he pulled out. Then I pulled out of Dante, and Angel’s hand on my shoulder told me I wasn’t getting up.

Dante turned around. He stroked his cock as he lay back on the pillow. With a single nod and a downward flick of his eyes, he gave the command, and I immediately obeyed. I took his cock as deep into my mouth as I could, then slowly pulled back. When I made rapid figure eights on the head of his cock with my tongue, he moaned, and my pulse jumped. Every sign of approval or arousal made my heart beat faster.

“That’s right,” he said, almost purring. “That’s perfect, Jordan. Fucking amazing.”

His cock twitched in my hand. I stroked faster, flicked my tongue faster, and Dante gasped. He started to say something, but his voice abruptly cut off, and I glanced up to see Angel kissing Dante. Dante ran his fingers through Angel’s hair, the same way he did whenever he kissed me, and my scalp tingled with the ghost of his touch.

I sucked his cock with even more enthusiasm now. Dante moaned, the sound barely audible since his mouth was against Angel’s. His hips lifted off the bed, squirmed, twisted, then his hand thumped beside him on the mattress, and Angel’s kiss muffled a deep groan just before hot semen hit my tongue.

I sat back, licking my lips. Dante released Angel and pushed himself up, sliding a hand around the back of my neck and kissing me deeply. I wrapped my arms around him.

After a moment, he broke the kiss, and our eyes met. He smiled and leaned in closer. “I love you, Jordan.”

“I love you too,” I whispered. He kissed me again, and for a long moment, I just held on to him.

“Hey, now, let me get in on this,” Angel said.

Dante and I laughed and broke our embrace. Angel kissed him, then put his arms around me and did the same.

We cleaned up, then collapsed into bed together, breathless and sweaty. I couldn’t speak for them, but amidst the post-orgasmic bliss was the most profound sense of relief. I’d been wound tight and on edge for days, since well before my conversation with Dante, and now I finally felt somewhere close to human again. Almost. Some of the tension lingered in my chest, the uncertainty tugging at my gut.

Then Angel rested his hand on my chest. His fingers twitched a little, probably with the barely contained urge to tap and fidget. I laced my fingers between his, and they settled. After a moment, Dante laid his hand over ours, and that deep-down unsettled feeling of my own quieted just as Angel’s hand had beneath mine. None of us

moved. Even Angel was completely still now.

I looked down at our joined hands.

There was no guarantee this arrangement would result in anything but disaster and heartbreak. The only way I could have them was to chance losing them. Whether or not the odds were in my favor, it was impossible to say.

Dante's thumb traced a soft arc along the side of my hand. I did the same to Angel's. Lying here with them, all I could think was that Dante was absolutely right: this was worth the risk. I couldn't predict the future, but I was content with the present and what I stood to gain if it worked out. Yes, this was right.

Deal the cards. I'm ready to play.

Epilogue

Dante

A little over a year later.

My eyes fluttered open. The morning sun poured in through the bedroom window, but something was out of place.

I looked to one side, then the other. Jade was curled up on Angel's pillow. Cally was sprawled on Jordan's side. Both cats were out cold, but their respective owners were nowhere to be found.

Craning my neck, I glanced at the alarm clock. It wasn't quite seven. Chuckling to myself, I rubbed my tired eyes and sat up. There was only one thing that could get Angel out of bed this side of nine o'clock, so it was a safe bet I knew exactly where they were.

I got up and threw some clothes on, then left the cats to sleep in while I headed down to the barn. At the other end of the otherwise empty aisle, Sasha lay in front of a door. He raised his head, then jumped to his feet and bounded toward me.

"Hey, buddy," I said, keeping my voice down as I scratched his ears. "Where's your dad? Where is he?" He bounced up and down, looking at me as if to say, "Who cares about them? Just pet me." I laughed and kept walking, and Sasha's claws clicked on the cement as he fell into step beside me.

Quiet voices and rustling straw drew me to the last stall on the left. Just as I knew they would be, Angel and Jordan both sat cross-legged up against the wall, watching a tiny chestnut foal get the hang of its wobbly legs. The mare, Cassidy, kept an eye on her baby but didn't seem too concerned while she munched her hay in the corner.

I let myself into the stall. Behind me, Sasha's tags jingled, and he grunted as he dropped onto the concrete to wait for us to come back out.

The foal regarded me curiously. I came down almost to its eye level and held out my hand.

"Colt or…" I paused. It was too early in the morning for all the right terms to pop into my head without a little work. "Filly?"

"Colt," Jordan said.

The baby sniffed my hand. It never ceased to amaze me how tiny they were when they were first born. If Sasha were allowed in here, he'd have dwarfed the little horse by a long shot. After a moment, the colt lost interest in my hand and resumed trying to keep his spindly legs under him.

I found a fairly clean patch of straw and sat beside Angel. I rested my hand on his thigh and leaned in to kiss him lightly. "Morning."

“Morning,” he murmured, stealing one last kiss before I pulled back.

Jordan looked past Angel at me. “What? I don’t get a kiss?”

“You’re too far away,” I said, chuckling.

“I’ve got you covered,” Angel said, and leaned to the side to kiss Jordan.

The foal wandered toward us, dividing his attention between these strange creatures lined up against the wall and the unsteady legs that were supposed to carry him around. When the baby got close enough to us, Angel petted his neck. The grin on his face made me laugh. He’d been thrilled every time he got to be around the babies, which had been a handful of times so far this season, but he’d been especially excited about this one. This would be *his* horse. He’d adored Cassidy, but Jordan wasn’t about to give up his prized broodmare, so he’d promised Angel this year’s foal.

And here he was.

I was working on finding a horse for myself too. There were several on the farm that I was comfortable riding, but I wanted one of my own. One that was already trained, not a baby, thank you very much, and Jordan had gotten a few leads on some mellow, well-mannered ones for sale in the area. As for this baby, Jordan and Angel were going to train him. Angel desperately wanted to get back into competition, so I had no doubt this little guy would see the inside of a show ring in the next few years. Me, I was content just to trail ride.

The baby wandered off again. Watching him figure out his legs was comical. It was hard to believe he’d one day have all the power and grace of the other horses in the barn. With time would come balance, confidence and the ability to sail over jumps, nail a dressage test, or whatever Angel asked him to do. For now, he was just lucky to stay upright.

After making a wobbly circle around the stall, the colt stopped in front of Jordan. He seemed focused on something. If his little brow could have furrowed with concentration, it would have, and he rocked back and forth for a second before his knees buckled. Then his back legs. In a motion that was anything but dignified, he flopped onto Jordan’s lap. He stretched his neck, rested his head on Angel’s leg, blinked a few times and closed his eyes.

Smiling, Jordan patted the baby’s shoulder. “I wondered how long it would take you to wear yourself out, kiddo.”

Moving carefully to avoid disturbing his horse, Angel pulled his camera strap over his neck and handed it to me. I didn’t have to ask. Slowly and quietly, I got up and took a few steps back. While I took a few shots of the two of them with the snoozing baby, hot air whooshed past the side of my neck, and I jumped before I realized

Cassidy's rather large nose was right next to my face.

I stroked her neck a few times, then gently pushed her nose away so I could take some more pictures. Of course, she walked right into my frame and wandered over to her baby. He opened his eyes and lifted his head, but then put it back on Angel's leg and fell asleep again. Evidently satisfied he wasn't in harm's way—and was out of her hair—Cassidy went back to her food.

For a while, I just watched Angel and Jordan fawn over the foal, and my mind wandered back to everything leading up to this morning.

The last year had been tricky. Settling into this relationship hadn't been easy. It would have been simpler if we'd all met at the same time, if Jordan had been there on that street in New Delhi thirteen years ago, but it couldn't be helped.

With some give and take, a hell of a lot of flexibility, and plenty of long, long "are we on the same page?" conversations, we'd gotten our legs under us and made it work.

Jordan had long ago evicted his jackass of an ex-boyfriend, and after Angel and I sold our house a few months ago, we'd moved in with him. The house was big enough for each of us to have some space, and being under the same roof instead of staying divided into "his" and "ours" made it easier for all of us to get on level ground. It made Jordan feel less like an outsider.

Our lives had blended, and so too had our careers, to an extent. When Angel had time, he worked some of the horses, and we both helped around the barn. It took some of the pressure off Jordan, having two extra pairs of hands. As a bonus, I'd never imagined Angel could get any hotter, but lifting hay bales and riding horses had done things to his already glorious physique that made my mouth water just thinking about them.

Angel and I had expanded fully into equine photography. God knew we had enough opportunity to build up a portfolio. Jordan had taken a shine to modeling, at least for artistic shots. One of Angel's photos of Jordan had won a silver medal in a prestigious competition late last year, and a black-and-white shot I'd taken of Jordan's bare shoulders would be gracing the cover of a magazine this winter. Of course, we kept this little bit of moonlighting on the down-low from his clients.

Rumors flew amongst our professional circles, and we'd all laughed behind closed doors at the way people whispered about us behind their hands. There was speculation about Jordan having affairs with either of us, and we found it endlessly entertaining to hear what horrified onlookers assumed about us. Oh, if they only knew.

In between moving, working and letting the dust settle, we'd even

managed a vacation together. Jordan had never been to Asia, and Angel and I both had a case of wanderlust that couldn't be ignored. Watching the two of them play with the tigers in that temple in Thailand last fall had been almost as much fun as watching them now with the newborn foal.

We'd learned to balance work and play. We'd gotten the hang of what we'd thought would be impossible, and once the growing pains had eased, here we were, up with the sun as the farm's latest addition sprawled across the laps of the two men I loved. Yeah, it had been complicated, and it would always be complicated, but I wouldn't have traded any of this for the world.

"So, any thoughts about a name?" I asked.

Angel shrugged. "I was thinking 'hey you'."

Jordan laughed. "Oh, yeah, *that'll* work."

"It's what I'll be calling him anyway, so…" Angel shrugged again.

"He still needs a halfway decent name to put on his papers," Jordan said.

Angel eyed him. "And I still need a cup of coffee before I can think about such complicated matters."

I thought for a moment. "What about Rule of Thirds?"

Jordan furrowed his brow. "Rule of Thirds?"

"Yeah, remember?" Angel idly ran his fingers through the colt's thick coat. "Dividing a composition into vertical and horizontal thirds to create more interest." His eyes flicked toward me. "To create more tension."

Jordan smiled, glancing at me, then at Angel. "Oh, yeah, I do remember."

"What do you think?" Angel asked the colt, but it didn't seem to care. Angel chuckled and kept petting his horse. To Jordan, he said, "I like it, actually."

"Me too," Jordan said.

"But," Angel said, "final approval has to wait until we've had coffee."

"That's a damned good idea," I said.

"Amen." Jordan gestured at the horse sprawled across his lap. "Um, anyone else mind going up and putting the coffee on? I seem to be…tied up."

Angel grinned. "Not right now you're not."

Jordan rolled his eyes. "Weighed down, then?"

"I'll go up and get the coffee." I handed Angel his camera. "You two, um, wait here."

"I don't think we're going anywhere," Jordan said.

I gave them one last look, then left the stall. With Sasha at my heels, I headed back up to the house to get us all some much-needed

coffee.

All the while, I smiled to myself. Angel finally had his horse. We'd all finally settled into being us. Day by day, things went smoother.

It hadn't been easy. It hadn't been simple. The future wouldn't be, either, but I was content with that.

I'd known from the beginning it wouldn't be easy. I also knew it would be worth it.

And I was right.

Hiatus
by
L.A. Witt

Hiatus

Three's a disaster when things come unraveled.

Rock star Nate Keller is on top of the world, but his headlining tour has one drawback. It keeps him away from his boyfriends Theo and Cameron for weeks at a time. They make every effort to come see him as often as possible, though, and after four and a half years as a trio, things are still going strong.

But then Cam comes alone, bringing news that stops Nate's world on a dime—after seventeen years together, he and Theo are separating. It's a trial separation, but nevertheless, Nate is devastated. He tries to pull them back together, but there's only so much he can do from the road.

At home, Cam tries to carry on, but feels like his whole life is spiraling out of control. Theo struggles to cope with the split and his worsening depression. They're both quickly losing hope for a reconciliation… and keeping the man they both still love.

When Nate makes a desperate last ditch attempt to pull their trio back together, it's make or break time. Is their trial separation just a temporary hiatus? Or is this the end?

This 84,000 word novel was previously published.

Chapter One

Nate

"The Riverside Hotel, please."

The cab driver punched it into his GPS, turned on the meter, and pulled away from the fairgrounds. The enormous parking lot had mostly cleared out, but there were still a few people making their way back to their cars, so I kept my baseball cap pulled over my eyes. As much as I adored my fans, and still couldn't believe they'd recognize me—never mind mob me—I had somewhere else I needed to be tonight.

In my lap, I turned on my phone and texted my boyfriend, Cameron.

Leaving now. Be there in 20.

Then I turned the phone over and grinned in the darkness. Cam and his husband, Theo, had flown in this afternoon. I hadn't seen them in three weeks—not since they'd met me like this at another hotel in another city—and I'd been climbing the walls every night. Skyping, texting, and e-mailing only did so much to make up for the lack of physical contact while I was out on tour. For the last seven months, I'd been on the road, only occasionally dropping back into LA, and in between, seeing them whenever they could meet me. Seven months down, at least five to go, assuming more dates weren't added again.

Technically, we had an open relationship. Especially while I was out on the road, they had no problem with me hooking up with other guys. The same went for them. The only rules were we had to use condoms with other people, and with each other if we'd been with anyone else.

In practice, though, they were monogamous except for me, and despite the option being open, I hadn't touched anyone. My band thought it was hilarious—now that we'd actually made it big and could act like the rock stars we'd always thought we were, I was practically celibate. Go figure.

But I didn't want anyone else. For the last four and a half years, the only men I'd touched were the two who'd welcomed me into their bed and their marriage. I was one lucky bastard too. They were sweet, generous, and both were dynamite between the sheets.

Didn't hurt that they were gorgeous too. They were different, and yet somehow complemented each other. Fair-skinned Cam, who rarely sunburned despite living in Los Angeles. Theo, who could tan just looking at a photo of a beach. They both worked out and looked the

part, and even though they'd long ago left the world of high-powered investment banking, they still looked that part too. Theo kept his dark hair short and professional. Cam looked studious and serious whether or not he had on his glasses. Small wonder they'd caught my eye that first night, since they'd both been wearing shirts and ties.

I shivered. God, those two were the reason business attire had been invented.

My phone buzzed. I turned it over, and Cam had written back.

Rm 1128. See you soon.

I put the phone down again and rolled my stiff shoulders. I was seriously tempted to ask him for a massage tonight, but damn it, he hadn't come here to work. He and Theo were here so we could fuck each other senseless, which would tide us over until the next tour stop where they could meet me.

On the other hand, it wasn't like I ever had to twist his arm to give me a massage. He was the most tactile man I'd ever met. If he was touching, he was massaging, and when we were together, we were touching. So after a roll in the hay with him and Theo, it was a safe bet that whatever was left of me was getting massaged.

Closing my eyes, I grinned again as a pleasant shiver ran through me and curled my toes inside my laced-up boots. This time tomorrow, I'd still be limping from the aggressive, bruising sex I always had with Theo, and feeling like a million bucks from his gentler, tactile husband.

Almost exactly twenty minutes after we'd left the fairgrounds, the taxi stopped in front of the Riverside Hotel. Of course it was one of those ritzy-looking hotels with a fountain out front and a fleet of bellhops wearing black-brimmed caps and pressed jackets.

I couldn't help laughing. Cam must've picked the place. That man had champagne-and-caviar taste like nobody else.

After I'd paid the driver, I started toward the gilded lobby. I was dressed down to blend in, but of course that had the opposite effect here. Jeans, a baseball cap, and an old leather jacket made me stick out like a sore thumb.

One of the bellhops held open the door for me. "Welcome to the Riverside Hotel."

"Thanks." I met his gaze, and his eyes narrowed just a tiny bit as if in recognition. I quickly broke eye contact and kept walking, hoping he didn't think I was being an asshole. I just really, really needed to get to room 1128.

I walked across the marble lobby, past another fountain, and got into an elevator. As the numbers above the door climbed, so did my pulse. Why the hell were my palms sweaty? I wasn't nervous.

Just excited. Insanely excited. Excited enough that by the sixth

floor, I was starting to get hard. Hopefully no one joined me in the elevator. And if they did, they didn't glance downward. That was just what I needed in tomorrow's tabloids.

Going UP? Creepy Elevator Encounter with Alien Emissary's Nate Keller!

The imaginary headline made me snort. It wouldn't be the worst thing they'd ever said about me.

At the tenth floor, I took in a deep breath through my nose and released it slowly. God, I missed my guys. One more floor, and I'd be…

There.

I stepped out before the doors had even opened all the way, making as subtle a gesture as possible about adjusting the front of my jeans, and hurried down the hall toward room 1128.

I reached the room and paused for one more deep breath. As I knocked, I couldn't stop myself from grinning like a giddy idiot—since, well, the shoe fit—so I didn't try.

Footsteps on the other side sent my pulse into the stratosphere. I didn't care which one it was. Cam. Theo. Both. I'd finally get to see them in real life instead of on a computer screen, and I'd get to kiss them and touch them and—

The door opened.

Cam met my gaze.

And my heart hit the floor.

"What's wrong?" I stared at him, trying to make sense of the dark circles behind his glasses, the tightness of his lips, the fact that he couldn't quite seem to look me in the eye.

He stood aside, keeping his gaze down. "Come on in."

Stomach churning, I stepped into the room. There were two beds, and one had a suitcase next to it, standing neatly against the footboard beside a pair of equally neatly arranged shoes. Only one suitcase, though. I looked around.

No pile of semi-folded clothes beside an open suitcase on a bed. No jumble of receipts and pocket change on the nightstand next to the perfect row of Cam's charging cell phone, wallet, and room key. No Theo.

Cam shut the door behind us. "We, um, need to talk."

Panic surged through me. "Where's Theo?"

"He's…" Cam put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. "It's just me tonight."

My mouth went dry. "What's—"

"Let's sit."

Oh fuck. This was a "you might want to sit down" conversation.

Just as well—my knees were starting to shake.

He put his glasses on the nightstand, carefully lining them up beside the phone and wallet like he always did, and sat on the edge of the empty bed. I hesitated but joined him.

Though he still didn't look at me, he did take my hand. His was sweatier than mine as he laced our fingers together.

"What's going on?" I could barely make myself whisper. "You're kind of scaring me."

"I'm sorry." He put his other hand over ours.

Where's your ring?

It wasn't on the nightstand with everything else. Ice slithered through my veins.

Setting his shoulders back, he lifted his gaze to meet mine. "Look, we haven't said anything because we knew you needed to focus on your tour. So we… I mean, we didn't—"

"Just cut to the chase, Cam." Why were my teeth trying to chatter? And where *was* his ring? "Give me the punchline. Please."

He held my gaze for a second. Then he stared down at our hands and gripped mine tighter as he said, "The punchline is that Theo and I are separating."

"Separating?" My jaw fell open. "You're…you guys are getting a divorce?"

"Not…" He shook his head. "I don't know. Not yet." With what seemed like a ton of effort, he looked me in the eye again. "It's a trial separation right now."

I couldn't speak. The words banged around inside my head but didn't make sense. Neither did the exposed white circle around his third finger. Cam and Theo? Splitting up? *How?*

As the silence wore on, Cam stared down at our hands, his fingers kneading the back of mine. His jaw was clenched, and deep crevices formed between his eyebrows.

I moistened my parched lips. "Are you…are you doing okay with this?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "Still doesn't seem real."

You don't say.

He swallowed hard and lifted his gaze again. "This doesn't have to change things with you, though. We both love you. And we know it's putting you in an awkward position, but…I don't know. Maybe with you being out on the road, it'll make it easier for…" Cam closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't even know."

Well, that was a relief. Sort of. Maybe?

"I don't know what to say," I finally managed to whisper.

"You don't have to say anything. I know this is a shock."

"It is. What happened?"

Cam lifted one hand off mine and ran it through his short, dark

hair. He paused with it on the back of his neck and closed his eyes as he rubbed the muscles, which, now that he drew my attention, were visibly stiff.

"Here." I moved onto the bed on my knees and gently nudged his hand out of the way. "I'm not a trained professional like you, but…"

"It's okay." He dropped his hand into his lap and let his head fall forward, and as I started rubbing his neck and shoulders, he added, "It's just nice to be touched."

A lump rose in my throat. How long had this been going on? How bad was it? They were fine three weeks ago. Right?

For the longest time, neither of us spoke. I worked at his muscles as much as I could. He'd taught me a few things—how to release a particularly stubborn knot, how to avoid tiring my hands out too much—but I would never be as good at this as he was. Still, the muscles did seem to loosen a little bit. My hands were already tired from tonight's performance, and my guitar calluses were probably scratchy as hell on his skin, but I didn't stop and he didn't complain.

Eventually, he rolled his shoulders beneath my hands and sat up. "Thanks. That felt really good."

"Don't mention it." I sat beside him on the edge of the bed again. "So, what happens now?"

Eyes closed, Cam lay back. I did the same, but shifted so I was on my side. I rested my hand on his chest, and he put his over the top of it.

A solid minute passed. Finally, he opened his eyes and, staring unfocused at the ceiling, he spoke. "He's staying with Zach and Taylor for now."

I pressed my lips together but said nothing. Theo and his brother barely tolerated each other. If things were bad enough with Cam to make that place more appealing… Fuck.

"We're…sort of taking a week or two to regroup. We're not seeing each other. Or talking."

"What happens when that week or two is up?"

Cam rubbed the back of his neck. "We'll talk. See…see where we go from there."

I furrowed my brow. "That doesn't seem like much of a plan."

He turned toward me, forehead creasing. "I don't know what else to do."

For the second time tonight, my heart hit the ground. The pain in his voice cut me to the bone, as did that slight shine in his eyes.

I squeezed his hand and brought it to my lips. "God, I am so sorry, Cam."

"Me too." The words were almost inaudible, as if they weren't even meant for me.

“I wish I knew what to say right now.”

“There isn’t much that can be said.” He turned onto his side, propping himself up on his arm. “It is what it is.”

But what it is doesn’t make sense.

“Is there anything I can do?” Could I have sounded any more useless?

“You’re here.” He touched my face and managed a weak smile. “Even with all this shit—especially with all this shit—I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. I just…wasn’t expecting…”

“I know.” He sighed. “I’m sorry we blindsided you with it. We really were trying to work things out, but…”

There were so many questions on the tip of my tongue. Who’d initiated the separation? Why? How long had this been going on? Did he think it was forever? Were they just taking a break, a hiatus, a moment to catch their breath before they realized they were still in love? Was he going to be okay? Was Theo?

But Cam already looked like he was near a breaking point. He obviously hadn’t slept. The last thing he needed was for me to give him the third degree about the bomb he’d just dropped. Neither of them were breaking up with me. This separation was about them, not me, and grilling him wouldn’t do anyone any good.

I didn’t know what to say.

Cam, however, took in a breath and met my eyes. His fingertips trembled against my cheek. “I’m sorry about all this. And I came here because I thought you deserved to hear it in person. But also…” The corner of his mouth twitched as if he were barely keeping a handle on his emotions. “Also because I needed to see you. I…I just need you.”

“I’m here.” I cupped his face. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you.” He slid his hand into my hair, drew me in, and kissed me.

Chapter Two

Cam

I hadn't been in the mood for sex in a solid month. Not even when Theo and I had put on a happy, horny united front when we came to visit Nate. Today, sitting around in this room for the past few hours, waiting for Nate to show up so I could tell him the good news, I'd thought a lot more about kneeling in front of the toilet than anything.

But the instant my lips touched his, I wanted him. I needed him so bad, my whole body suddenly ached for him. I'd been stiff and sore with fatigue, especially after my flight, but that was all a distant memory now.

Without even breaking the kiss, I tugged him with me and rolled onto my back. He straddled me, and he kissed me with that feverish hunger I didn't know I'd been craving. My cock was hardening fast and…God, so was his.

I was out of breath but couldn't make myself come up for air. I'd had this dream too many times lately and wasn't ready for that moment when we'd break contact and he'd suddenly be gone.

I slid a hand between us and cupped him through his jeans. He groaned, pressing into my palm, rubbing into it, fucking into it.

His leather jacket squeaked. Were we still that dressed? Oh fuck. That had to change. I wanted absolutely nothing between us, so I shoved his jacket off his shoulders.

He arched a little, squirmed, and shrugged it off. It squeaked again and protested before falling to the floor with a heavy thud. Grinding his hard-on against me, he murmured, "Be easier if we just got undressed."

"Uh-huh." I tugged his shirt free from his jeans. "Maybe we should do that."

He sat up and peeled off the tight shirt, and my mouth watered as I drank in the sight of his lean torso and tattooed arms. I ran my hands up his smooth abs to the thin fan of hair on his inked chest—I massaged people all the damned time but still marveled at the way his skin felt beneath my palms. He was real, wasn't he? This wasn't a dream in between shouting matches. Was it?

He covered his hands with mine and looked down at me, subtly rubbing our clothed dicks together. Staring into those pale blue eyes, I was pretty sure the only reason I was still breathing was his chest rising and falling beneath my hands, as if he were setting the pace for both of us, keeping my lungs working while my brain checked out.

Then he let go of my hands, leaned down, and brushed his lips

across mine. “Clothes off.”

Before I could say anything—as if I could—he rolled off me. We quickly shed our clothes, letting them fall wherever. They could be folded later. For now, I didn’t care.

Even with his combat-style boots, he was stripped down before me. I was such a clumsy, scatterbrained wreck tonight, I was still taking off my jeans when he pulled back the covers and climbed in beneath them.

Oh well. That meant when I finally dropped my briefs on the floor, he was waiting for me, holding the blankets up and gesturing for me to join him. As soon as I did, he pulled the covers over us, and in the same motion, wrapped his arms around me.

Beneath the hotel sheets, we kissed. We ran our hands all over each other like we’d never touched before, and if I wasn’t mistaken, if I wasn’t reading too much into it, he was holding me just as tightly as I was holding him.

The heat of his skin nearly brought me to tears. I touched people for a living, and yet I felt like I hadn’t so much as brushed against another human being in eons. This was no dream. This wasn’t a patient passively letting me undo their tension and stiffness. This wasn’t a cold shoulder or a half-assed attempt at make-up sex when a fight wasn’t really over.

This was the warm, intimate embrace of someone who could still look at me.

Combing my fingers through his hair, I cautiously broke the kiss, and, no, he didn’t vanish. He stayed right there beneath the blanket, pressed up against me with the sole of his foot running up my calf and the palm of his hand tracing the curve of my spine. The instant our lips parted, he dipped his head and started on my neck. I thought I heard myself curse, or maybe say his name, or…something. Whatever. I tilted my head back, gripping his hair in one hand and his shoulder in the other, and closed my eyes as his lips skated along the side of my throat.

He hooked his leg over mine and pulled my hips in closer so our cocks pressed together. I sucked in a breath through my teeth as goose bumps prickled every inch of my skin—God in heaven, I’d missed this man’s touch.

Nate curved a hand over my shoulder, and then he shifted. I was too far gone to make sense of exactly how, but we were moving, and I let him guide me until I was on my back.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he murmured between kisses. “Being out on the road…without you…”

“I’ve missed you too.” I dragged my fingers up his back, just letting the nails bite in. “Been…counting down till tonight.” Even if

tonight meant telling him things I'd hoped wouldn't happen—I wasn't going to think about that now. I had Nate in my arms. I needed him more than I'd ever needed him, and he was here, and maybe I wouldn't lose my mind after all.

"I really…" He shuddered hard, which pressed his cock against mine and made my breath catch even before he added, "I want you to fuck me."

I moaned something that hopefully came across as an affirmative.

He lifted his head. "Did you bring lube?"

I froze. "I…"

"Fuck."

"Wait, I think the bathroom has some hand lotion."

"That'll work." He pushed himself off me and rolled to his feet.

The sudden absence of his warmth made me shiver. I pulled the covers up to recoup some of his body heat, but damn it, it just wasn't the same.

Fortunately, he wasn't gone long. In seconds, he was back with the tiny bottle of hand lotion.

"Isn't much," he panted as he rejoined me in bed, "but it'll do for the moment." He kissed me again, letting it linger for a moment, then broke the kiss and growled, "*God*, I want you to fuck me. Now."

"Then turn around."

It was his turn to shiver. We kissed once more, and got up. He positioned himself on his hands and knees, and I knelt behind him. As I smoothed the lotion on my cock, gritting my teeth just to keep from losing control too soon, Nate rocked back and forth, subtly moving as if I were already fucking him. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the sheets, and his inked traps rippled beneath the skin.

He exhaled hard, letting his head fall forward. "C'mon."

"Patience," I purred, and grinned when he cursed under his breath. I cupped his ass cheek, then moved to his entrance and carefully pressed a lotion-covered finger into him. "It'll be worth the wait. You know it will."

"I know. Just…don't want to…"

"Neither do I." I swept my tongue across my lips, my heart thumping as I watched my finger sliding in and out of him. "Don't want to hurt you, though."

No more than I already have tonight.

I banished that thought before it could kill the mood.

"Please, Cam," he ground out. "I've been waiting for this all day."

"Me too." I slid my finger free, and neither of us even breathed as I guided my cock to him. I pressed against him, intending to ease myself in, but right then, Nate pushed his whole body back against mine, and my dick slipped past his tight ring, taking my breath away.

“Oh God!” He shuddered, clenching around the head of my cock, nearly forcing me back out.

“You okay?” I started to withdraw, but he leaned back again.

“M-more.”

“Are you—”

“Damn it, yes. *More*.”

Fuck, I loved it when he was like this. Steadying his hips and my cock, I pressed in again and slid deeper this time. In no time, I was buried all the way inside him and had to stop for a moment, holding his ass against me with a death grip because I was too overwhelmed to move.

Slowly, the room stopped spinning. I leaned forward and guided Nate down to the mattress. He didn’t resist—he seemed to collapse in slow motion, sinking to the bed with me right over him, still as deep inside him as I could get. He released the edge of the mattress and pressed his forehead into the sheet.

“You feel so good,” he murmured, sounding like he was on the verge of tears.

“So do you.” Whoa. I *was* on the verge of tears. I nuzzled the side of his neck, fighting all the emotions that suddenly wanted to surface. I concentrated on rocking my hips, riding him smoothly and slowly, but everything I’d been tamping down for…weeks? Months? It was all bubbling up now, aching in my throat and stinging in my eyes. I was desperate for him in ways I’d never been before. Not just sexually, but in a way that was somehow even more raw, more primal.

Nate felt around, and when he found my hand, he pulled my arm beneath him. I squeezed my eyes shut and splayed my fingers so he could slip his between them. With long, slow strokes, my body pressed against his and our hands clasped tightly together, I rode him, silently begging with every stroke for both my emotions and my climax not to come too soon.

Beneath me, he shuddered. “God, Cam…” His muscles trembled. His breathing fell to short, sharp gasps. He was impossibly tight around me now, clenching around my cock as I thrust just a little harder to drive him on, to get him to his orgasm.

My vision was darkening, blood pounding in my ears, and my body moving now like it had a mind of its own, and only one objective—to force myself as deep as he could take me so I’d be buried to the hilt when I came, and, oh Jesus, I was about to come. Right there, right on the brink, teeth digging into my lip and muscles burning with exertion, and—

“Fuck!” Nate’s whole body jerked, and just like that, we were both gasping, cursing, coming.

With one final shudder—whose, I couldn’t say for sure—we

stilled. I carefully withdrew, but neither of us tried to pull away from each other. We'd shower together in a minute, maybe enjoy a long, lazy bath in that giant whirlpool, but not yet.

I shut my eyes tight, squeezing free a hot tear, and touched my forehead to the back of his shoulder. Our hands were still clasped tightly together against his chest, his heart pounding beneath my palm, and I made no move to pull away. I'd needed him too long to break any of this contact yet.

Everything else is falling apart, but you're still here.

Thank God, you're still here.

* * * * *

Every inch of my body remembered everything we'd done a few hours ago. As I rolled over, squinting against the painfully bright sun, last night bit into my hips, back, and shoulders.

I could live with it, though. Tonight's red-eye would suck, but it'd be worth it.

Beside me, Nate was out cold. He'd turned onto his stomach and lay with his face nestled into the pillow and his arm hanging off the side of the mattress. I smiled as I watched him sleep, and tried not to think about how roomy this king-sized bed seemed. Waking up with Nate nearly always meant waking up in a bed full of knees and elbows because Theo would be here too.

But…not today.

And maybe, I thought with a sinking heart, *not ever.*

I sighed. Well, there went that good mood. I lay back on my pillow and gazed up at nothing. I'd managed to keep my emotions in check last night. Yeah, I'd teared up a bit during some of the more intense moments, but the dam still held.

It was only a matter of time, though. Between the physical separation from Nate and the trial separation from Theo, I was nearing my breaking point. I just hoped I made it home first. If I was going to give in and let go, it might as well be in that empty house. Not in a cab, not in the security line at the airport, not on the plane.

And sure as fuck not in front of Nate.

I swallowed. Especially not in front of Nate. I'd expected the news to devastate him, and it had. The hurt in his eyes had been palpable. The last thing he needed to see was how much this was killing me too.

Maybe we'd made a mistake, keeping this off his radar. Whenever we'd come to see him, we'd put on a united front and happy faces, and focused on him. In fact, I was starting to think that was why things had fallen apart after he'd gone on tour—he'd somehow become a buffer. Or a conduit for the feelings we had left for each

other. When the three of us were in bed together, Theo and I were on fire like we'd been in better days. Out of bed, everything seemed fine too.

And then Nate went out on tour, and the wall of ice went up, and…

Here we were.

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. I would've sold my soul for a solution to my foundering marriage. If there was anything left that we hadn't already tried, I'd have jumped on it in a heartbeat.

Would Theo? No idea.

Not that it mattered.

Because when I got home tomorrow, he'd be gone.

That was one part I hadn't had the heart to tell Nate. We'd been discussing separation for a while now. Theo had moved into the guest room three months ago, and I was pretty sure that was when we'd brought it up the first time.

But the fight that dropped the hammer happened only a week ago. In the aftermath, we'd agreed on the separation. Theo had canceled his plane ticket to for this trip, and while I was gone—while I was here with the man we both still loved—he and his brother would be moving him out of the house.

My first night back home would be the first night sleeping alone. Truly alone—without a single soul in the house besides me.

Yeah. I'd wait until then to break down. Because I was pretty damn sure I wouldn't make it *past* that point.

I quickly swiped at my eyes—not breaking down now, goddammit—and glanced at Nate. Still asleep. Good. He couldn't afford to lose sleep while he was on tour. He'd found out the hard way on his first tour that lack of sleep plus too much stress meant he'd pick up the first microbe that came along, and then he'd push through until pneumonia set in or his voice gave out—whichever came first. He didn't need to be hospitalized again.

Guilt gnawed at my gut. Dropping the separation bomb on him probably wouldn't help. But when we'd started this three-way relationship, we'd all vowed to be completely open and honest with each other. No secrets. Theo and I had already bent that rule by keeping our problems out of Nate's sight. Now we didn't have much choice but to say something. I wasn't going to lie to him about why I was here and Theo wasn't.

And now that I thought about it, Theo deserved to know that I'd told Nate.

I carefully got out of bed, moving as silently as possible to keep from disturbing Nate. I put on one of the fluffy white robes with the

embroidered Riverside Hotel logo, took my phone off the nightstand, and stepped out onto the balcony.

Then, ignoring the queasy feeling roiling in my stomach, I speed-dialed Theo.

On the second ring, he answered with a flat, "Hey."

"Hey." My mouth went dry. Staring out at the city, I said, "So, um. I talked to Nate. About what's going on."

"Oh." Something rustled in the background. Was he still in bed? I wasn't even sure when he got up these days. "Um. How did he take it?"

"As good as we could've expected, I guess."

Theo exhaled. "I should call him. It might be good for him to hear from both of us."

"Yeah." I turned around, watching Nate's sleeping form through my semitransparent reflection. "Give him a little while, though. He's not up yet."

"He's—" Theo paused. When he spoke again, his voice was cold. "So he's still there."

"Yeah, he's—" I faced the city again. "Is that a problem?"

"No." His tone suggested it clearly *was* a problem. "Just…could you pass the message along for him to call me when he has a chance?"

I ground my teeth and tried not to get defensive. If I'd been the one in his position, five hundred miles away while Theo broke the news to Nate, I'd probably not feel great about the situation either. "I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

Silence set in. I fixed my gaze on the road below, tracking some cars as they drove past the hotel. It was something to focus on. Something besides this uncomfortable silence that I didn't know how to break.

Theo beat me to it anyway. "I should go. Zach will be here any minute."

I winced. "Okay. I just wanted to let you know. And I'll have him call you as soon as he's got some coffee in him."

That brought a faint laugh out of him. "Sounds good. Talk to you later."

"Talk to you later."

I hung up, rested my elbows on the railing, and pressed my thumbs against my forehead.

Well. This was all just getting more fun by the second, wasn't it?

Chapter Three

Theo

Sitting up in bed, I stared at my phone as if it might tell me how the fuck I was supposed to feel after that conversation. Things hadn't been this awkward when I'd stood in the kitchen yesterday morning, exchanging a few terse words with Cam before he and his suitcase went out the front door.

So Nate was still asleep. In the bed they'd no doubt shared last night. Had they slept together? Or…*slept* together? I didn't know which scenario was worse—if Cam and Nate *had* had sex after Cam told him the news, or if Nate had been too rattled and upset. I hated the idea of them having sex right now, but I didn't want to hurt Nate. I didn't want to hurt Cam either, but the damage was already done there. We'd been firing shots for too long to pretend either of us would make it out unscathed.

But Nate…

I winced.

I should've gone. The thought of traveling with Cam made my teeth grind, but it would've been worth it to be there when Nate found out what was happening. Did he know I still loved him? That this didn't have to change anything between him and me?

Cam wouldn't have lied to him. For all our problems, Cam wasn't an asshole. I'd known him too long to imagine him telling Nate anything but the truth—that we were splitting up, but neither of us wanted to lose him.

Dropping back onto my pillows, I tossed the phone onto the empty side of the bed. Nate wasn't a child. We weren't gently assuring him that we'd work out custody later, that this wasn't his fault and he could be at my place every other weekend in between staying at the house with Cam. But why did it feel that way?

I scrubbed my hand over my face. I should've been there.

It wasn't just because I needed to look Nate in the eye and say what I needed to say. I needed him. I missed him. Especially over the last several weeks, when Cam and I had gone from tense to quickly unraveling, I'd craved Nate. His touch, his presence, his voice without that mild distortion from the phone or computer.

Sniffing sharply, I closed my eyes. I'd talk to him later today. And we'd make arrangements to see each other. When? No idea. Where? Wherever his band stopped long enough for him to escape for a night.

I wasn't accomplishing anything by just lying around, though, and I wasn't in the mood to catch hell from my brother if he showed up

and I wasn't ready to go.

So I made myself get up. Zach would be here soon. I wanted to at least be showered, dressed, and caffeinated before I had to face him.

As I put myself together, I kept my phone close by with the ringer turned up. I was constantly on edge, listening for Nate's ringtone, afraid I'd miss his call and my opportunity to talk to him before he was back out on the road.

I was halfway through my second cup of coffee, eyeballing my phone as it lay dormant on the counter, when a diesel engine rumbled into the driveway. My stomach tightened.

I took another sip of coffee and headed for the door. Halfway there, I realized I'd forgotten my phone, and sprinted back to the kitchen to grab it. Not missing that call, damn it.

Then I went out to meet my brother.

He was stepping out of his enormous silver pickup when I came out onto the porch. He took off his wraparound sunglasses and paused to toss them on the dashboard, then slammed the door. I had hoped his wife, Taylor, would come along, if only to keep him on a leash, but it was just him. Great.

"You ready?" he asked in that tone that suggested he didn't expect me to be.

"Yeah." I gestured at the garage. "Everything's in there. You want a cup of coffee first?"

"No." He stopped in front of the truck. "Let's just get this done."

Shrugging, I continued down the walk. After I'd entered the code into the keypad, the garage door rumbled to life.

"Thanks again." I turned to him. "I really appreciate—"

"Don't mention it," he muttered.

I ground my teeth. "Look, I can stay somewhere else. If you don't want—"

"Theo." He put up a hand and shook his head. "I'm not going to turn my own brother away."

"You're not making me feel terribly welcome, though."

"What do you want me to do?" He narrowed his eyes. "You put us all through that bullshit song-and-dance about your 'marriage'"—emphatic air quotes, of course—"and *two* fucking weddings. Now you're—"

"Don't act like my marriage is the first one in this family that hasn't worked out," I snapped.

We locked eyes.

"I told you back then that what you're doing is a joke," he said coldly. "And after all that time, thought, eh, maybe you guys have it together after all." He added a humorless laugh. "Obviously not."

My jaw ached from clenching it so hard. "Says the man who

brought a different wife to my commitment ceremony *and* my wedding." He started to speak, but I stabbed a finger at him. "I'm not going to argue about this with you again, Zach. I had two ceremonies because the first one wasn't legally recognized. Something you've never had to even think about. Both times, when I said 'I do,' I meant it. But I'm not a goddamned psychic. I had no idea…" The anger vanished like a trapdoor falling out from under me, leaving me off balance and reeling. In a quieter voice, I added, "This wasn't how I thought things would play out, okay?"

My brother watched me for a moment. Then he exhaled, and his expression softened. He put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it. "Let's get this stuff out of here so you can settle in."

My shoulder sank beneath his hand a second before he withdrew it. Nodding, I said, "Yeah. Good idea."

Neither of us said another word. In silence—the kind of silence I was used to with my brother—we started moving plastic crates from the small mountain in the middle of the garage. I wasn't taking everything yet. There was no point in moving it all only to move it again when I got my own place. If I got my own place.

I tamped down on that thought. We weren't reconciling. This was a trial separation, but it was over and it needed to be. Just because it hurt like hell didn't mean it wasn't the right thing to do. So I'd be back here soon enough, collecting all my other crap and—

Nate's ringtone exploded out of my phone, startling me so bad, I nearly dropped a crate of clothes.

"Shit." I set the crate on the tailgate and pulled my screaming phone out of my pocket. I'd forgotten I'd turned the ringer up so loud so I'd be sure to hear when Nate called. Mission accomplished, apparently.

Nate's picture on the screen made my heart skip. I swiped it to answer and held it to my ear. "Hey."

"Hey."

My chest tightened. *God, I've missed you.*

Zach brushed past me and put another crate on the tailgate. I lowered the phone. "Hey, I just need to take this really fast."

"Whatever." He headed back in to get another box.

I put the phone to my ear again. "Sorry. I'm… My brother's here, helping me…"

"I know. I just…I wanted to call you."

"Glad you did. I've, um, I've missed you."

"Me too." He paused. "I've got a long stop in Amarillo the week after next. Maybe you could come see me?"

Cool relief flooded my veins. "Send me the details. I'll do the best I can." I took a deep breath. "Are you all right? With what's going

on?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I asked you first."

He was quiet for a few seconds. "I'm kind of in shock."

I winced, tapping my fingers rapidly on the truck bed's side rail. "I'm sorry. We should've given you some kind of heads—"

"No, no. Cam… He explained what happened. That you guys didn't…" He sighed. "I get it. It's okay."

"This doesn't change us," I said. "I mean, it doesn't have to."

"I don't want it to," he said quickly.

"And it's…" I struggled to keep my voice even. "It's totally fine if things don't change between you and Cam."

"I know. But it's, um, good to hear it from you too." He paused again. "Listen, I should let you go. I need to get back to the bus, and I know you're…busy."

I eyed the boxes we'd already put on the truck bed. *This is happening.* "Yeah. I should run. It's good to hear from you though. Talk again soon?"

"Definitely."

I forced back the emotions that tried to creep into my voice. "I love you."

"I love you too." He exhaled. "I'll be on the road tonight. If I've got some signal, do you want me to call?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that'd be great." I managed to smile despite all the emotions chewing their way through me. "I'll look forward to it."

"Me too."

We hung up, and I pushed out a long breath. It wasn't enough, but at least I'd finally heard from him. Some sort of contact. Confirmation that he wasn't slipping away along with Cam. Hope that I'd see him very soon.

But for the moment, I still had work to do, so I muffled a cough and pushed my shoulders back. As I pocketed my phone, I turned to see my brother looking at me.

He arched an eyebrow. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing." I shook my head and started past him. "Don't worry about it."

He stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Theo, what's going—"

"Don't. Okay?" I struggled to hold his gaze, and he could probably see the tears in my eyes. "Let's just get done and get out of here."

He studied me, a million questions probably on the tip of his tongue, but he let me go. "Okay."

"Thank you." And I went back inside to get one of the remaining crates.

Chapter Four

Nate

I set the phone down and exhaled.

Beside me on the edge of the bed, Cam softly asked, “How’s he doing?”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s doing great.” I turned to him. “Neither do you.”

He avoided my eyes as he absently straightened the stack of clothes he’d folded while I was on the phone. “Hasn’t been easy for either of us.”

“But…” I hesitated. “Maybe that means it’s the wrong thing—”

“It isn’t,” he whispered. “And it’s just a trial separation anyway.” He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. “We both just need a break.”

You both need each other. I can hear it in your voices.

“I’m still not sure how this is going to work,” I said. “Seeing both of you…while you’re…”

“It’s probably just as well you’ll be on the road for a while.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “As hard as it is not to see you, you’ll be out of the crossfire.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against him.

I don’t want to be out of the crossfire. I want to help you find a ceasefire.

“I’m sorry you had to get hurt in this too.” He stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head. “I guess that’s a downside of a three-way relationship. If two people fall apart…”

Sighing, I nodded. “I know. And I guess we all knew it was a possibility.”

“We did.”

Though deep down, this wasn’t the disaster I’d envisioned when I’d worried about our arrangement. If anything, I’d always figured I’d be the one jettisoned if something went south. I was the new addition. The extra. The one at risk of becoming the third wheel.

Cam and Theo? Unbreakable.

Broken.

I sat up and touched Cam’s face. “So what do we do now?”

“Theo and I will deal with our shit.” He clasped his hand over mine. “You? Focus on touring. We’ll come see you as often as we can.”

“But separately.”

“Separately.”

I nodded. “I guess that’s all we can do, right?”

“Yeah.” He glanced at the alarm clock beside the bed. “We should get going. It’s almost one.” He’d paid for late checkout, especially since his flight didn’t leave until tonight, but my bus was rolling out no later than three. And I’d already learned on the last tour that they would leave without me if I decided to go just *one* more round with the guys, so I didn’t fuck around with getting back in time.

Without speaking, we both rose and moved to the door. There, we pulled each other close and just hugged for a moment, still silent, still…*here*.

“I love you,” he whispered after a while.

“I love you too.”

He met my gaze, then drew me in for a long, soft kiss. It was tempting to drag it out even longer, but that would only tempt me to drag him back to the bed, get naked with him one more time, and if I missed my bus, oh well.

But I had a show tomorrow night. I needed to be on that bus.

So I broke the kiss and gently freed myself from his embrace. “I’ll see you soon?”

“As soon as possible.” He managed the faintest of smiles, and it was enough to encourage me to return it.

“Text me when you get home, all right?”

“Always.”

One last look, one last brush of his hand across mine, and I made myself leave.

The door clicked shut behind me. Numb, on autopilot, I shuffled to the elevator. We always said our good-byes in the room—couldn’t risk the paparazzi catching me red-handed with my married boyfriends—so I always did this part alone, but it felt weird this time. Like I wasn’t just leaving…I was *leaving*.

But that was ridiculous. I was the only one in this arrangement who wasn’t leaving. I was going back to work, just like the guys did whenever they flew back after a visit. My job happened to mean riding around in a tour bus in between gigs, and leaving Cam and Theo behind in hotel rooms after our occasional encounters.

I stepped into the elevator and requested the lobby. As the doors closed, I rubbed my eyes. I didn’t understand what I was feeling. Everything was all fucked up. They were splitting up, reassuring me at every turn that nothing changed between each of them and me.

But if that was the case, then why did I feel like I wasn’t going to see either of them again?

* * * * *

The taxi dropped me at the fairgrounds where the band had

performed last night. I showed my pass to security, and they let me into the place where the tour buses were parked. Roadies and venue crew were lounging around, most of them talking, playing on phones, or smoking. Everything was probably packed up and ready to roll. They just had to wait for all the passengers to arrive.

A few people glanced at me as I walked by, but nobody said anything. I had a good relationship with all our roadies—I'd worked as one myself for a few summers before my own career had taken off, and I'd vowed never to be the diva musician who walked all over the people he depended on. Today, though, I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I just wanted to get on the bus, kick back on the nearest piece of furniture, and…think? Sleep? Cry?

Write. I needed to write.

That thought gave me a little boost and got me walking faster. As soon as I was on the bus, I strode past my sleeping bandmates to my bunk and dug around for my notebook and a pen. As the bus eased into motion, I lay back on the hard mattress, flipped open the ratty cover, and started writing.

I didn't care about lyrics or rhythm right now. At this point, it was just throwing emotions at the page. Everything I'd felt since last night. All the shit that didn't make sense. How fucking terrified I was that I was going to lose both Cam and Theo, and how helpless I was to stop them from hurting right now.

More than once, I had to stop and wipe my eyes. My hand shook enough that my shitty handwriting was even shittier, but whatever. The words all had to come out, and then maybe I could rearrange them into something that my band could play. Some good might as well come out of all this.

Around the time I was finally slowing down, after I'd filled a solid four and a half pages—*one for every year I've been with them*—the curtain opened between the sleeping area and the rest of the bus.

Jill, my best friend and the band's lead guitarist, appeared in the doorway, black hair tumbling over her faded David Bowie shirt. "Hey. Can I join you?"

Well, if there was anyone on this bus whose company I could stand right now…

"Sure." I scooted over against the wall, and she lay down beside me, head on my shoulder and my arm around her. The bunk barely fit us both, but we managed.

We'd been friends for years, and this was our normal MO—cuddling up together like a couple even though we'd never in a million years have dated. But I liked having some sort of physical affection while I was this far from Theo and Cam, and she liked being able to cuddle up with a guy who wouldn't try to take advantage of

her. Rumors flew about us, but we knew the truth, the band knew the truth, and my boyfriends knew the truth. Everyone else could eat a dick.

"What's wrong?" she asked in her usual "just answer me because I know something is wrong" tone.

I didn't want to talk about it, though. Not with her. Not with anyone except the piece of paper currently propped on my knee.

But I trusted her, and, hell, maybe I did need to talk to someone. Writing it all down had only done so much.

"Nate?" She pushed herself up on her elbow, balancing precariously on the edge of the bunk as she faced me. "What's going on?"

I kept my arm around her to make extra certain she didn't fall, especially if the bus swerved or something. With my other hand, I closed the notebook and tucked it down between the mattress and the wall. Then I gazed up at the bunk above mine. "So, Theo and Cam are…taking a break."

Her razor-thin, triple-pierced eyebrows rose. "A break?"

"Yeah. A trial separation." I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. "They're not divorcing yet, but…"

"But that's usually how separations end," she said quietly.

"Exactly."

She put her hand on my shoulder. "So, what happens now? With…I mean, how does something like that work? If they're breaking up with each other, but not you?"

I let out a long breath. "According to them, nothing changes."

"Is that even possible?"

"I have no idea. Cam came to see me by himself and told me what's going on. Theo's going to try to meet me in Amarillo. And then I guess…" I swallowed. "I guess we figure it out from there."

"Wow. Man, I'm sorry to hear it. I don't even know what to say."

"Neither do I." I drummed my fingers on my knee. "I just can't believe they're breaking up. Or even *thinking* about breaking up. They've always been so…"

"Solid?"

I nodded. "They've been through shit that would've had any other couple throwing in the towel. I mean, they both lost their jobs when the economy tanked, and that wasn't long before Cam's mom moved in when she was sick. They made it through all that, came out stronger on the other end, and…" For a trained singer, I was having a hell of a time keeping my voice from breaking.

"And they fell apart anyway."

I nodded again because I didn't dare speak.

Jill settled against me again, her head on my shoulder, and she

didn't say anything either. She was too pragmatic for "look on the bright side…" bullshit. And she knew me too well to think an attempt at optimism would do anything more than drive me deeper into my cynicism.

After a while, she quietly asked, "Theo's coming to Amarillo?"

"Hopefully. He probably has to make sure he can take the time off."

"Fingers crossed," she said. "Sounds like you really need to see him."

"Like you wouldn't believe," I whispered.

God, please, let him get the time off.

Chapter Five

Cam

I barely remembered the flight, the walk through LAX, or getting a taxi. Everything was hazy from the moment Nate had left my hotel room until now. It was still kind of hazy now. As I watched the sun rise over familiar scenery through the dusty cab window, my mind was just…not here.

It was a damn good thing I hadn't left my car in long-term parking. Theo and I had both sworn that off after we'd come back to a flat tire. Things like that were part of life, but an epic pain in the ass after a long day of traveling, so from then on, we'd decided the expense of a cab was well worth it.

And it wasn't like Theo would be willing to come pick me up any more than I would've been willing to get in the car with him. Better a long, silent drive with a stranger than a long, silent drive with my husband. Ex-husband? What the hell was I even supposed to call him now? I wanted to hold out hope that we'd put ourselves back together, but I didn't want to get my hopes up. Why wasn't there some term for this? Some shorthand for "the guy I'm still married to and trying to work things out with but am not currently living with or even really speaking to, because somewhere along the lines we fucked up and now here we are"?

I sighed, touching my forehead to the cool window, and watched the early morning commute thicken on the freeway. Soon, I'd be home. Back in my own bed.

In my own bed alone. Just like it had been for much too long now. After being with Nate yesterday morning and the night before, I dreaded the thought of sleeping alone. More than the sex, I missed having someone next to me. I'd been with Theo since college—my sophomore year, his senior year—and we'd practically lived together from the start.

Whenever we'd had to be apart, it had always been temporary. The semester I'd spent in Germany when I was a junior. The odd business trip. Visits to family members who weren't ready to accept us as a couple. Those separations had been bearable because we'd known they had finite ends. When they were over, cell phones were turned off, doors were locked, and we didn't get out of bed until another round of sex was physically impossible.

I pressed my thumb against the groove my wedding ring had worn into my third finger as I preemptively pushed back the lump that was inevitably going to start rising in my throat. Those days were over.

Sleeping alone was the norm, and now that Theo had moved out—*oh my God*—I'd be doing everything alone.

I tried to tell myself it was for the better. Maybe it would be good for both of us. A break from squabbling over toothbrushes on the bathroom counter instead of in the medicine cabinet where they *belonged*, or whether it really was *such* an imposition to swing by the grocery store on the way home from work to pick up a few things. It was exhausting, especially because I never knew when the teeth-grinding tension over stupid crap would play out as simmering resentment or explode into a screaming match. I needed a break from all that. It was hard not to see the appeal of a few nights without wondering if we'd find ourselves calmly explaining to the cops that, yes officer, everything was fine, and no officer, we won't wake our neighbors up again, and yes officer, we both feel safe here.

Yeah, I needed a break from all that. Rationally, I understood that.

Irrationally, I wanted to walk through the front door in time to catch Theo before he went to work and steal a welcome-home quickie. Send him to work with an orgasm and a smile; send me to bed with his touch still tingling on my skin.

Not happening. It was over.

No. Not over. On hold. On hiatus. I'd taken off my ring and Theo had moved out, but we hadn't signed anything yet.

I took off my glasses and rubbed my tired eyes as I muttered a few curses, hoping I didn't do it loud enough for the driver to hear. He didn't say anything, so…mission accomplished?

What I really wanted to do more than anything was tell the driver to turn around and take me right back to the airport. Nate would be in Chicago tonight. Wouldn't take much to get a ticket. I could meet him there. After his show.

And then what, Cam? Stow away on his bus?

I closed my eyes as my heart sank deeper in my chest.

As much as I wanted to spend more time with Nate, especially now, I couldn't. I had reasons to be here instead of there, even though none of them seemed all that important compared to being in the same space as Nate. I had a schedule full of clients. At some point, I needed to sit down with Theo and figure out where we went from here. Couldn't fucking wait for that part.

The driver took the familiar ramp toward Sherman Oaks, and dread prickled my spine.

Empty house, here I come.

Before I was ready, he pulled into my driveway. I paid him, took my suitcase from the trunk, and headed inside.

Out of habit, I punched the code into the garage, and as the door came up, wished I'd just gone in through the front door. The garage

was empty on one side. My car took up the left bay, but the right was bare.

Theo had been piling crates in here before I left. Things he'd planned to move out while I was gone, like clothes and the equipment he used for his freelance design work. I'd expected it to be gone, but somehow, the absence of that pile took my breath away.

My shoulders sagged as I trudged across the concrete.

I took my suitcase upstairs to the bedroom, but didn't bother to unpack. Right now, there was only one thing I needed.

I toed off my shoes, collapsed across the bed, and passed out.

* * * * *

It was one in the afternoon when I finally got up and took a shower. I probably should've stayed in the hotel one more night and flown back this morning, but the misery of a red-eye had actually been more appealing than staying there by myself.

Which is fucking pathetic. You're screwing up your own sleep pattern because you can't stand sleeping alone.

I scrubbed a wet hand over my face as the water poured onto my shoulders. Yeah, maybe it was pathetic. But I was in the middle of separating—possibly for good—from the man I'd shared my life with for the past seventeen years. If ever there was a point when I was allowed to be pathetic, this was it, so I didn't fight it. Hell, I pretty much embraced it and wallowed in it. Much more of this and I'd be crying into a fishbowl of merlot, and actually, the more I thought about it, the more appealing that idea sounded.

That made me laugh, even if it was halfhearted. I tilted my head back, squeezing my eyes shut as the water ran over my face.

After I finished my shower, I dried off, and I was thankful I didn't have my contacts in or my glasses on right then. The blurriness made it just a little harder to see how devoid the counter was of any evidence that Theo had ever been here—his toothbrush wasn't beside the sink, the toothpaste wasn't on the other side with the cap halfway across the counter, and his razor wasn't in its usual spot beside the faucet. I was seriously tempted to take my own toiletries from the medicine cabinet and lay them out, just to occupy the space. That would last about three seconds before the disorganization started driving me bats, though, so I just ignore the counter and continued drying off.

In the bedroom, I put on my glasses and a pair of jeans.

Then, with a queasy feeling in my gut, I ventured out into the rest of the house. Time to see what the place looked like now that he was gone. I was curious, and at the same time, nervous. It felt a lot like

when I'd finally made it home after a big earthquake, or the time Theo and I had come home from a concert to find our front door partway open. Approaching the stairs now gave me the same knot of apprehension as when I'd walked up the steps, house key in my shaking hand, and let myself in to see how badly the place had been damaged, or when we'd first stepped in with the cops to see what the burglars had taken or broken.

The stairs creaked beneath my feet as they always did, and somehow seemed louder, like after we'd closed on the house and were walking through it before the movers came. Back when it was still completely empty and hollow.

On the ground floor, I didn't bother looking in the guest room. Knowing Theo, the bed was unmade and his towel was draped over the footboard, the pillows contorted from him twisting and mangling them to get comfortable. I'd go in later and throw all the bedclothes and that fucking towel—seriously, the man's "hang up towel" feature had never been installed—into the laundry.

Not now, though. I started with the living room. His iPad and charger were gone. Otherwise, nothing had changed. He hadn't taken any DVDs or electronics from the entertainment center. I tried not to hang too much hope on that. Just because he'd left behind his Blu-ray special edition of *Star Wars—only* the original three—didn't mean he was coming back.

I took a deep breath and continued past the living room.

The downstairs office was still furnished. There were still books on the shelves, framed degrees—his and mine—on the wall. But it might as well have been empty. The desktop was almost completely bare. My immaculate desk looked messy and disorganized compared to his. He'd left the modem and router, which I appreciated. The two giant flat screen monitors were gone, along with his electronic drawing tablet, scanner, and laptop. His piles of clutter and papers were missing too.

On the windowsill, a framed photo had been turned facedown. I knew what it was, and I knew it would hurt, but I picked it up anyway.

It was the three of us in Hawaiian shirts and colorful leis, grinning and tanned and just a *little* bit drunk thanks to the mai tais in our hands.

God, we were so happy back then. It must've been almost four years ago now that we'd taken Nate to Maui with us. We'd had to scrimp and save to afford that trip. During our investment banking years, we could've gone first class, but those days were behind us now, and at that point, we were still struggling to make ends meet. I was still in massage school. Theo was working for that shitty bank

that had since gone under. Nate was still playing for tips at night and waiting tables for even fewer tips during the day.

But somehow, we'd managed. Discount flights, a crappy hotel as far from the beach as possible on an island that small, and a rental car that was a step above a Flintstone's car, and we'd had the time of our lives.

We'd all grown up in California, so sex on the beach wasn't a tremendous novelty, but that trip was the first time any of us had ever had a threesome on the beach. A few hours before the luau when this picture was taken, if I remembered right. A tiny secluded inlet, wetsuits and snorkel gear strewn all over white sand, a couple of voyeuristic sea birds and—for a moment—a disgusted sea turtle for company…that amazing, languid sex had been well worth the sunburns.

It was on that trip that we'd all realized this thing with Nate went deeper than just having a regular fuck buddy. A few mai tais had brought out the I love yous, and the next day, as we nursed our hangovers and hid from the morning sun, we realized we'd meant it.

What I wouldn't have given to go back to the way things were back then.

But that wasn't happening, because those days were behind us now. I put the picture back down on the windowsill hard enough I thought I might've cracked the frame. I didn't, though, and the second time, put it down gently.

All right. Enough of this. I was just torturing myself. What I needed to do was get a cup of coffee, get my head together, and find something else to focus on besides my marriage. Or lack thereof.

Shaking myself, I walked out of the office and headed for the kitchen.

Two steps onto the familiar tile floor, I stopped dead in my tracks.

The evidence of Theo's absence was all over the house, but nothing hit me in the chest quite like the empty space beside the coffeepot.

Every single morning, Theo used the same red ceramic coffee cup. He'd drink a cup before he went to work, rinse it, and leave it there beside the machine. When he stayed up late working on a design project, the red cup followed him into his office, and eventually found its way back to that spot before he went to bed.

And now it was gone.

His side of the bed had been empty for a long time, but now the house was too. Theo was gone. I was alone.

And the dam finally gave.

I slumped against the island.

Stared at the bare spot beside the coffeemaker.

And cried.

* * * * *

After a day of feeling sorry for myself, I had to get back to being an adult. I managed a few hours of sleep that night, and the next morning, headed out into the real world. I had clients booked who needed massages, not excuses.

At least this was a job that made me feel better, as opposed to my old one, which had stressed me to the point of nearly developing a drinking problem. It had been a huge shift from the cutthroat world of investment banking to the more sedate—but still demanding—life of a massage therapist. A huge shift that I had never once regretted.

Sucking down coffee like my life depended on it—which it kind of did—I drove out to West Hollywood. My first client of the day was a director/producer of a successful sitcom. She brought me in three times a week and paid me handsomely to keep her stress from turning into unmanageable pain. The second, who I'd meet after lunch, was a stuntwoman who'd hurt her back in a fall that hadn't gone as planned.

After I'd finished with both of my West Hollywood clients, I drove to Bel-Air for one more—a runway model who'd taken a spill on a catwalk in eight-inch heels and wrenched her lower back—and my day was done. On the days I worked out of the clinic I shared with three other therapists, I'd see more clients, but if I had to run around, I kept it to a max of four. That way if traffic got really bad, I would only have to reschedule and comp one or two clients rather than half a dozen.

As I drove home toward the end of the day, I felt a hell of a lot better than I had this morning. My hands and shoulders were tired, my back a little achy, but I felt worlds away from that colossal mess who'd fallen apart in the kitchen yesterday and spent the rest of the day having a pity party. Sure, my separation still stressed me out and made me sad, but a few hours of focusing on my work had centered me. There were still good things happening in my life.

And it didn't hurt when one of Nate's band's songs came on the radio. I turned it up, tapped the beat on the gear shifter, and despite the never-ending line of slow-moving cars in front of me, let myself be happier for a while.

There *were* good things in my life these days. I still had Nate. We'd texted a few times today, and he'd promised to call tomorrow when the bus stopped in Cleveland. He was having a tough time with me and Theo splitting up—I didn't blame him—but just having contact with him had eased my nerves quite a bit. From what I'd gathered, the contact had been good for him too. I hoped he and Theo were doing

the same—they both needed it.

I still had him, and I still had my job. My fucking amazing job. I'd been fortunate as hell, and never went a day without realizing that. Back in the beginning, I'd met my mentor, who was an exceptionally well-known massage therapist, especially in Hollywood. He'd cultivated a reputation as being one of the best, and his client roster read like a who's who of A-list actors, top musicians, and star athletes.

He'd taken me under his wing, and when he'd started scaling back his roster so he could think about retiring, he'd passed people on to me. I hadn't clicked with all of them, but the majority had kept me on. Not even three years into my career, I was making money hand over fist and loving every minute of it.

Before I'd gone to massage school, the bank where Theo and I had worked had gone under in spectacular fashion. Overnight, we'd gone from making a killing in the investment world to being let go after several of our bosses were escorted out of the building in handcuffs. What had once been an elite firm was suddenly a catastrophic black mark on a résumé. Potential employers regarded us suspiciously. How much had we been involved in the criminal activity? How much had we known? Worse—had we been the whistleblowers?

Theo had persevered and eventually landed a job at one of the larger corporate banks. He hated it, and the pay wasn't great, but it was what he was good at. And he liked the stability of a paycheck over relying on his freelance artistic work, so he grudgingly gave them fifty hours a week in exchange for just over half what he was making before.

I'd given up on the financial world after I couldn't even get a job as a bank teller, and decided to gamble with a career change. It was expensive, and I'd struggled at first, but in the end, it had worked out. I loved my job. The brutal world of investment banking had been exciting for a twenty-something kid, but that ruthless industry seemed alien to me now. I loved the more tranquil profession of massage therapy. I was actually helping people.

And after a day of focusing on relieving people's pain so they could function, I actually felt pretty fucking good.

Right up until my driveway came into view with Theo's car parked in it.

My good mood evaporated in an instant. Fuck. What now?

I didn't mind him letting himself in. That meant he could come and go, picking things up as needed, without me having to be here. In fact, he'd probably been banking on getting out before I came home.

Surprise.

I parked in the garage next to the empty space his car used to occupy, collected my phone and coffee cup, and went inside. As I

rinsed out the cup, Theo stepped into the kitchen. Despite his ever-present tan, he was slightly pale, the way he usually got when he hadn't slept much.

"Hey," he said. "I…didn't realize you'd be home so early."

"Traffic was light." I set the cup and lid in the drying rack. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

He bristled and didn't meet my gaze. "Look, I'll be out of your hair in a minute." He pointed over his shoulder toward our office. "I just needed to get a few things for my workstation."

"Oh. Do you need any help?"

Theo shook his head. "No, I've got it. It was just a couple of boxes and these." He held up some cords and cables.

"Okay." I had no idea what to say. Were we supposed to make small talk? Or…? Why wasn't there a manual for interacting with your spouse during the "take a break and regroup later" period?

"Anyway." He cleared his throat and started toward the door but stopped. For a good five seconds, he stood in the hallway, back to me, rocking from his heels to the balls of his feet.

Then, slowly, he turned around and looked at me. "Is Nate doing all right?"

"You talked to him."

"I know. But you saw him." He straightened a little, as if steeling himself. "Is he…"

I sighed, wiping a few droplets of water off the sink's edge. "He's hard to read."

"That's no surprise." He chewed his lip. "Maybe it'll be easier when I can see him in person."

"You're planning to go soon?"

Theo nodded. "Yeah, he…he said they'll be in Texas next week. Just waiting for the green light from my boss."

"Good. He'll be glad to see you."

Why do we feel like strangers?

"It'll be good to see him too."

"Well, have a safe trip. When you go to see him, I mean."

"Thanks." He started to turn toward the door again but paused. "When are you going to see him again?"

"Don't know yet." I tapped my fingers on the edge of the sink. "Hopefully soon."

"I guess this means we need to keep each other posted," he said. "About travel plans. So we, uh, don't wind up there at the same time."

I cringed inwardly.

This felt like a fucking custody agreement. Thank God we'd never gotten around to pets or kids. "I'm sure Nate will let us know if there's a conflict."

“True.” Theo lowered his gaze. “Yeah, he…he probably will.”

We met each other’s gazes for a couple of seconds.

“Anyway.” He gestured toward the door. “I should go.”

I just nodded.

Without another word, he left. After the front door had clicked behind him, I moved into the living room and sank onto the couch. Staring up at the ceiling, I sighed.

This would get easier with time. It had to. We’d been fucking miserable for a while now. This really was for the better.

How it would ultimately play out, I had no idea. At this point, I wasn’t even sure I wanted to know. For now, this separation was a breather. A chance to collect our thoughts and decide if moving on was the best course of action. Whatever decision we made, it would be better than the bitter stagnation that had led us to this.

The only thing I knew for sure right then was that I had never been more grateful to have Nate in my life.

Chapter Six

Theo

I couldn't decide if I should take off my wedding ring or leave it on.

Lying in a small, borderline shitty hotel off the interstate in Amarillo, waiting for Nate to text me, I turned the gold band over and over between my fingers.

Cam had stopped wearing his almost immediately. No one asked him questions if he showed up without it. His clients were used to him not wearing one—he never wore his ring or his watch while he was working.

I worked in one of those offices where people noticed. A coworker had come in without his wedding ring once, and the whispers had started flying before he'd even reached his desk. Turned out he'd smashed his hand on something over the weekend. He'd wisely removed the ring before his finger had swelled up too much. A week later, the ring was back on, and when he brought his wife to the Christmas party a few months later, people finally stopped speculating about trouble in paradise.

If I didn't wear mine, people would notice. And I really, really didn't want to talk about it.

So for the time being, my ring stayed on at work.

But what about here?

The fact was, Nate would notice one way or the other. The gold band or the tan line would probably be equally conspicuous to him.

So if I left it on, was I being stupidly optimistic? Or if I took it off, was I admitting defeat?

On or off, you're overthinking it.

I turned it slightly so I could see the engraving on the inside. It was sadly ironic that when we'd had our commitment ceremony eleven years ago, we'd both joked about engraving *Put It Back On* inside the bands. Somehow that didn't seem as funny now.

Not as funny, but perhaps slightly less painful than the words he had chosen:

Until the end of time — Cam.

On either side of the quote were engraved dates—our commitment ceremony and our legal wedding. Two of the best days of my life.

And now…well.

I set the ring on the nightstand. Maybe I'd just leave it off for a while. See how that went. How it felt.

I lay back again, hands laced behind my head, and gazed around the room. This place wasn't so bad. It wasn't the high end kind of room Cam always insisted on—my paychecks these days didn't really stretch that far.

That thought brought with it a whole different flavor of bitterness. I tried to shove it away. Nate would be here soon. That was something to focus on, not the fact that living on my own was going to mean relying on my paychecks (which were a joke) and my freelance work (which was sporadic). Money would be tight for Cam too, but not nearly as—

Stop. It is what it is.

I shook myself, then swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. I rose, walked to the window, and pushed the ugly gray curtains apart.

Outside, the flat yellow terrain stretched on for miles. The air was clearer here than LA—still hazy from dust, but without the thick brown smog. Cars and a million eighteen wheelers flew past on the I-40, following the ribbon of asphalt into the horizon and continuing toward God knew where.

It never ceased to amaze me how much Nate seemed to enjoy the endless road trip part of being on tour. I'd always been too impatient for road trips, and day after day of sitting on a bus for six, eight, twelve hours between cities would have had me screaming for mercy before the first city had faded in the rearview. As far as I was concerned, air travel was the greatest of mankind's achievements, and I looked forward to the day when supersonic travel was available to hurl us to all corners of the globe in no time. Bring on the teleportation.

Nate didn't mind, though. That wasn't to say he never got bored—one of his band's most popular songs, "Falling Ahead," had been inspired by the monotony of the road. He and his guitarist had actually written it on the stretch of the I-5 between Portland and Seattle. I would've been carsick after three miles.

But he loved it. He loved the road. He loved performing. When we'd met him almost five years ago, he'd still been struggling, but a deal and two albums later, he had the success he'd been dreaming of since he was a kid.

I smiled to myself as I watched the traffic flying by outside. I was thrilled for him, and proud of him—he'd clawed his way to the top, working his ass off every step of the way and falling flat on his face enough times that people were telling him to give it up and let it go. But he'd refused, and now, he had his name in lights, just the way he'd always known he would.

Cam and I could not have been happier for him. And hey, who

didn't dream about having a rock star for a boyfriend?

That actually brought a laugh out of me, and it also sent a tingle up my spine. My hot, rock star boyfriend who'd be here any—

Right on cue, my phone buzzed.

I snatched it off the nightstand.

Leaving now. There in 10.

My heart sped up. I quickly wrote back, *Rm 211. See you soon.*

Then I put the phone back down and gazed out the window again, grinning like a damned idiot. I would've been more than happy to come get him, but this arrangement required a degree of discretion. Careers and family civility depended on it. Only a select few people knew what we had with Nate, and no one could afford the press gossiping about it.

As it was, Nate's love life had been the subject of intense public speculation ever since this tour started. They'd fabricated a love triangle between him, Jill, and the lead singer of the opening act. With some carefully placed candid shots, they'd even managed to storyboard a convincing plot. A photo of Nate caught by surprise by a camera, another of the other singer snarling something at someone, and one of Jill with a smug smirk, and a headline declaring that the singer had busted Nate with his guitarist, and people were convinced. The three of them had had one hell of a laugh over that.

No one needed the press finding out that the truth was even juicier than fiction. That he was indeed involved with two people, but instead of a pair of gorgeous female musicians, he was with a couple of married men.

Well…sort of married.

My stomach lurched, but I forced the thoughts out of my mind and stared down at the parking lot, looking for the cab that was going to be here at any moment.

Excitement and apprehension both swelled in my chest. It had been over a month since we'd seen each other in person. I couldn't wait to be in the same room with him, but at the same time, there was no way we'd get through a night together without at least touching on Cam's conspicuous absence.

Fine. Fine, we'll talk about it.

Just…be here. Where I can see you.

God, I miss you.

I took a deep breath, willing my nerves to settle. He was on his way. All I had to do was wait a few more minutes.

A car pulled into the parking lot below, and right then, my phone buzzed.

I grabbed it and read the message.

Here. On my way up.

And right on cue—car door slamming. Footsteps on the stairs outside.

I closed my eyes, my pulse shooting upward.

Yes. Finally.

Then I went for the door, and I pulled it open just as he was clearing the last step.

My heart fluttered. He had on a plain leather jacket and a Dodgers cap, which was all the camouflage he needed to slip past most people, but I recognized him in an instant.

Our eyes locked.

In an instant, everything I'd been worried about evaporated.

You're here. Oh my God, Nate. You're…you're here.

I stood aside to let him in, but as he stepped past, he grabbed me with an arm around my waist, pulled me with him, and his lips were against mine before the door had slammed behind us.

Oh fuck. Oh Jesus.

I had no idea if he'd pushed me or I'd stumbled, but somehow, we wound up against the wall. I slid my hands under his jacket, his body heat raising goose bumps along my arms, and he arched against me, pressing his thick cock against mine.

And his kiss. Holy fuck. Deep and aggressive, just the way I liked it. Fingers running through my hair, his other hand gripping a belt loop as if he thought I might try to slip away. Fat fucking chance.

I pulled one hand out from under his coat, knocked his hat off, and grabbed his hair. He sucked in a breath, breaking the kiss, and when I pulled his head back, he shuddered. Again when I started kissing his neck.

"M-missed you." He was hoarse, so it must've been a hell of a show tonight. "Been thinking…'bout this…for days."

"Me too," I growled against his throat. "Why aren't we naked yet?"

"Y-you tell me."

That settled that. I shoved him back a step, and we both stumbled toward the bed. I pushed off his jacket. He damn near tore off my shirt. I unbuckled his belt, but before I could go any further, he dragged me down on top of him on the mattress. A strong hand curved around the back of my head, and he gave me no choice but to let him claim a deep, hungry kiss. As if I was going to say no. Not after I'd gone this long without tasting him.

I pressed my hips against his and muffled his low groan with my lips. Jesus, I was drunk on him. Intoxicated by the sheer knowledge that I had him here, beneath me, hard for me, and I was getting higher and higher with every twitch of his fingers against my scalp, every motion of his lips and tongue tangling with mine, every breath

rushing past my cheek. No wonder I'd been losing my mind recently. Living without this? Torture of the purest kind.

I rolled onto my back, and Nate climbed on top. With my hands free now, and his shirt no longer caught between my body and the bed, I pushed it up and off. As I tossed it out of the way, he started to come back down, but I stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Wait. Just…let me look at you for a second." I ran my hands all over his tattooed arms. He'd lost some weight recently—touring had that effect on him—but he still looked healthy. And smoking hot.

Our eyes met. He swept his tongue across his lips as I reached up to run my fingers through his spiky hair, which he'd dyed a deep cobalt. It looked good on him. Brought out those intense, disarming eyes.

As he held my gaze, something in his expression shifted. The wild-eyed lust was still there, but there was more now. Something unsteady and raw. I couldn't put my finger on it, couldn't define in words why his eyes seemed to be filled with equal parts relief and pain and bone-deep fear, but I felt it as viscerally as I saw it in him.

Lifting myself up on one elbow, I slid my other hand into his hair and whispered, "I am so glad you're here."

"Me too." His voice was shaky, ragged, and as he sank into my embrace and another kiss, he held me tighter than I'd been held in recent memory.

Then, he broke the kiss and buried his face against my neck. I wrapped my arms around him, closing my eyes as I held him close, stroked his hair, and just let his body warm mine. Neither of us made a sound. A moment ago, we'd been clawing at each other, grinding against each other, but now…

"It's been too long." He kissed beneath my ear. "I hate being so far away from you."

My eyes stung, and I surreptitiously wiped them. "It's part of your job."

"I know. But…" He lifted himself up and gazed down at me. His eyes were dry, but that raw hurt was still there. "I just miss you. Especially…"

I swallowed. So did he.

Cupping his face, I whispered, "You won't always be touring."

He kissed my palm. "Seems like I should be home now, though."

"No." I shook my head. "You're not putting your dream on hold. Not for us."

His Adam's apple jumped, and he avoided my eyes.

"Nate." I lifted my head and kissed him softly. "I love you, and I miss you, but I would never ask you to compromise the career you've always wanted. Ever." I ran my thumb along his cheekbone. "And I'm

here now. I'm not going anywhere tonight."

That brought a smile to his lips, and when he met my gaze again, my spine tingled.

"Well." He dropped a soft kiss on my mouth before pushing himself up again. "If we're going to get the most out of tonight, maybe we should lose the rest of these clothes."

"Good idea."

We both got up. When we fell into bed again a moment later, every stitch of clothing was on the floor along with our shoes, and there was nothing left between us.

This wasn't the kind of sex I was used to with Nate. Normally, we were throwing each other around, pinning each other down, winding each other up until someone begged to be fucked. The sex we had left marks. Even drew blood once in a while, if a nail bit in too hard. Nate liked gentle, playful sex, but he *loved* it rough, bordering on violent, and that was fucking catnip for me.

But tonight was different.

Oh, we gripped hard enough to hurt, and teeth and nails grazed skin enough to make us gasp and grunt with pain-pleasure. We slammed each other down on the creaking mattress hard enough to knock the headboard into the wall. Kisses were deep and demanding, long and breathless. Bite marks and sweat glowed on his skin as well as mine. Rubbing. Grinding. Thrusting.

Normally, we touched like we wanted it to hurt.

Tonight, we touched like it would hurt to let go. Like if I went one moment without holding him against me, skin brushing as much skin as possible, he'd vanish right there in my arms, leaving me with nothing but the buzzing AC and billowing curtains.

"Oh God," he whimpered, throwing his head back as he rubbed his rock-hard dick against me. "I'm gonna come. G-gonna…"

"No." I grabbed his hips and stilled him. "Not yet."

"But I…" He stared down at me, eyes wide, his hips trembling as he tried to fuck against me despite my grip. "Please. I'm—"

"Not until you fuck me."

His lips parted. He shuddered, and I thought he might've lost it after all, but then he closed his eyes, exhaled slowly, and relaxed. "You son of a bitch."

I laughed. "Isn't like I said you couldn't come at all."

"No." He leaned down and bit my collarbone hard enough to make me arch off the bed. "But you're gonna pay for that. I was *right* there."

"Bring it."

He kissed beneath my jaw. "I hope you brought lube."

"Absolutely."

Chapter Seven

Nate

I couldn't get the lube on fast enough. Though my almost-orgasm had receded, I was still turned on beyond words. I needed to fuck him right now before I lost my mind.

Theo put a pillow under his hips and spread his legs. I knelt between them and started to put some lube on my hand, but he shook his head.

"Just fuck me," he panted.

"But—"

"Please."

I hesitated. He knew his limits, though, so I capped the bottle, set it aside, and guided myself to him, heart pounding with anticipation. He was almost exclusively a top, but some nights, he just needed to be fucked. Apparently this was one of those nights, and I was more than happy to oblige.

I pressed against him. Then a little harder. As the head of my cock slid into him, he grunted softly.

"You okay?"

Theo nodded. "G-good. Just…want—oh fuck!"

I slid in deeper. He closed his eyes and mouthed what I assumed were curses. Tilting his head back, he exposed his throat, making me want to kiss and bite my way up and down his neck. Jesus, he was sexy.

I licked my lips and concentrated on easing myself into him. He was tight—so, so fucking tight—and I didn't want to hurt him. Though knowing him, maybe that was what he wanted. Still, there was hurting him, and there was *hurting* him. Once he'd relaxed enough that I could fuck him easily, then I'd hurt him the way he wanted.

Little by little, he yielded to me, so I picked up speed, and he moaned.

"Like that?" I asked through my teeth.

He nodded. Then he blinked a few times and looked up at me. "Harder."

"Harder?" I grinned. "How much harder?"

"Till it…" He swept his tongue across his lips. "Till it hurts *you*."

Oh, challenge accepted.

I pulled my knees up beside his hips, sat up a little, and *pounded* him as hard as I could.

"Oh fuck, yes!" He sounded like he was on the verge of sobbing. Perfect. "Jesus, Nate…oh God…"

I gritted my teeth and gave him everything I had. Any other night, I'd have teased him mercilessly. After all, he'd stopped me just before I was going to come, and damn it, he'd pay for that.

But not tonight. The desperation in his eyes was enough to make my breath catch. I understood why he hadn't let me come. *This* was what he needed.

And, fuck, this was what I needed too. *He* was what I needed. I held his hips and rode him hard, forcing myself as deep as I could.

He squeezed his eyes shut and arched his back. "Oh fuck, Nate. You feel so good. God, yeah…"

My back and thighs were aching, and my lungs were burning, so I slowed down. I leaned over him, holding myself up on my arms, and kept thrusting, kept forcing myself as deep and hard as he could take me.

Theo reached up, grabbed the back of my neck, and pulled me down into a deep kiss. It fucked up my rhythm, but he didn't seem to care and I sure didn't. I kissed him. Rode him. Held on to him.

My body was exhausted from my last few shows, but damn it, I wasn't holding back with him. Not even if it meant I was sore tomorrow. I finally had Theo under me, touching me, kissing me—I didn't care how I felt tomorrow or the next day or the next day after that because I felt *amazing* right now. So much for him stopping my orgasm. Being pulled back from the edge was a distant memory now. Every stroke, every kiss, every moan hauled me closer to that edge, and no amount of holding back was going to stop me from coming this time.

"Fuck," I breathed as I broke the kiss. I buried my face against his neck, squeezing my eyes shut as I slammed into him again and again. "Gonna…gonna…"

Theo clenched around me. His whole body shuddered under mine. Hot semen hit my stomach.

And I lost it. I buried myself inside him. Threw my head back. And everything went white.

When my mind and my vision cleared, I pulled out but didn't move. Theo wrapped his arms around me, and he held me there, my body pressed against his as we both caught our breath.

He ran his fingers through my hair. "I needed that."

I lifted my head and met his gaze. "I haven't been able to think about anything else all day."

Theo grinned. Then he drew me down and pressed the most tender kiss to my lips. "You staying tonight?"

"Are you kidding? Wild horses couldn't drag me away."

"Good," he growled, lifting his head to kiss me again. "Because I'm not done with you yet."

Goose bumps sprang up, and more followed as he parted my lips with his tongue. Knowing him, he wasn't lying—this was going to be a long, *hot* night.

After a few minutes, we decided to get cleaned up. Toweling off was probably sufficient, but what fun was that when there was a perfectly good shower a few feet away?

The hotel room's shower stall was probably cramped by conventional standards, but for someone who'd been showering on a tour bus for the last few months, it was enormous. Even with another person, it was huge.

Especially when we were standing this close together. In between soaping and rinsing, we held each other. We kissed lazily, exchanging little looks and grins but not saying a word. We weren't turned on yet. Neither of us were hard. Once we'd recovered a bit more, though, it wouldn't take long. I could already feel renewed arousal simmering under the surface. We just weren't in any hurry…yet.

The shower was long and lazy, but couldn't last all night, so we finally got out and dried off. We both left our towels hung sort of half-assed from the shower curtain rod, and that was when reality started needling me.

Cam would've been annoyed as hell. Theo and I might've laughed about it, rolling our eyes as we hung the towels straighter so they'd actually dry.

I didn't mention that to Theo. No point in ruining the mood.

Lying in the giant bed, we pulled up the sheet and faced each other on our sides.

"It's really good to see you," he said.

"You too." I combed his damp hair with my fingers. "I love being out on the road, but man, I really miss you." Somehow, I'd caught myself and kept from saying I missed both of them. As hard as it was—and as much as it hurt—to pretend Cam didn't exist, tonight was about me and Theo. If there was anything I could do to help bring them back together, it could wait until I'd made absolutely sure Theo and I were on solid ground.

He trailed his fingers up and down my arm. "So how's the tour going?"

I shrugged. "It's going. I mean, we're still enjoying the shows and all, but there are times when I'd like to sleep in my own bed."

Which is in your house. Which you're not living in. Fuck.

I cleared my throat. "My bandmates and I keep making bets on when we'll be rich. We've got the famous part going, but we figure if we keep at it, we might see some of that money."

Theo laughed. "Guess that part isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"Not really." I rolled my eyes. "Fucking record companies. Bunch

of scam artists."

"And you're surprised?"

"Hardly. I guess I hoped there'd be a little bit more cash flowing in, but people keep telling me it'll happen eventually."

"Of course it will." He laughed dryly. "Kind of poetic, isn't it? Two bankers and a rock star, and we still have to worry about making ends meet."

"Except only one of you is a banker now."

"True." Theo deflated a bit. "And he makes more now than he did when he worked in finance." He sighed. "At least one of us got our shit together."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Cam's absence was suddenly unavoidable. Neither of us had said his name, but now that he'd been mentioned, he was so obviously *not here*, it was excruciating. It reminded me of the first rehearsal after my friend Kyle had quit Alien Emissary a couple of years ago. Like life was going on, but a person who'd been there all along was even more conspicuously gone than he'd ever been conspicuously there.

"I don't want to kill the mood." I stroked Theo's cheek with the backs of my fingers. "But I need to know. What happened?"

Theo closed his eyes and slowly released his breath. "It's been a long time coming."

"So I gathered. Except I always thought you guys were happy. I mean…how long are we talking about?"

"I don't know." He turned onto his side and draped his arm over me. "Once things started coming unraveled, it felt like they'd been falling apart forever. But I know they weren't. I just don't know when it started." His eyes lost focus, and he laughed humorlessly. "That makes me sound sane, doesn't it?"

I didn't know what to say. Finally, I managed to whisper, "Do you still love him?"

Theo winced and slowly let out of his breath. Nodding, he met my gaze. "I don't see how I could ever not love Cam. We've been together almost half my life." His eyes flicked away, and he stared up at the ceiling. "Loving him hasn't changed. Being able to live together…"

My stomach flipped. "Since when?" I shook my head. "I mean, you guys squabble like anyone, but…"

Theo rubbed a hand over his face. Then he turned onto his back and dropped his hand to his side. "We've been fighting *so much*. About stupid shit. We can't even talk about the major stuff, because we're too busy butting heads over everything else."

"Like what?"

"Well, he's always been a neat freak. I can live with that." He gave a quiet, sheepish laugh. "And I know it's not easy for someone like

him to live with someone like me."

"You're not that bad. No worse than me."

Theo's lips curved as if he were trying to laugh again, but that was as far as he got. "He's changed, though. It used to be he'd get a little annoyed if I left the toothpaste out, or left a dish in the sink. Maybe roll his eyes or mumble at me, but it wasn't a big deal. Now it's like…" Theo stared up at the ceiling and sighed. "It's like I'm walking on eggshells. I can watch my step and do everything right, then leave the remote on the armrest instead of the coffee table, and off he goes."

"It's that bad?"

Theo nodded. "It's exhausting."

He had a point. None of us were easy to live with, but Cam could blow a gasket over the smallest thing being out of place. And he hadn't always been like that. Steadily, over the last couple of years, he'd become harder and harder to please when it came to neatness. Maybe it hadn't bothered me as much because I wasn't there all the time.

Shifting beside me, Theo exhaled. "Anyway, I don't know. We started talking less, fighting more." He closed his eyes, and his chest sank as he let out a long breath. "I love him. I do. But we're just fucking miserable together." He turned toward me. "And I don't know how to fix it."

I didn't know either. I took his hand and held it, and we lay in silence for a little while.

He turned onto his side again and touched my face. "I am so sorry we've dragged you into this."

"You haven't dragged me into anything." I kissed his forehead. "I knew when I got involved with you guys that if you ever broke up…"

Except back then, I couldn't imagine you two breaking up.

I still can't.

How, Theo?

A lump rose in my throat, but I pushed it back. "The only thing I know now is I don't want to lose either of you."

"Neither—" He swallowed, and my heart ached as I realized he was probably about to say he didn't want to lose either of us. But he was already halfway there.

I touched his face. "I'm not going anywhere. I know I'm out here on tour, but I'm still here, if that makes sense."

He smiled, though his eyes didn't echo it. "I know. And money's probably going to get tight, but I'll do the best I can to come out and see you as much as possible."

I nodded. "Let me know, and I can help with the plane tickets."

Subtly, but unmistakably, he flinched. I knew that was a sore spot for him—not being absolutely financially independent—but I needed

him to know I'd help.

He slid his hand into my hair, and a weak grin pulled at his lips. "I like this color, by the way. It looks great on you."

I laughed, grateful for the subject change. Half the time I forgot my hair was even colored, never mind a deep blue like it was now. "It was Jill's idea."

"That's not surprising. She's got good taste when it comes to coloring your hair."

"Why do you think I let her pick out the colors?"

He laughed, though it was almost soundless. "Do you even remember your natural color?"

"Whatever it was, it'd probably be half gray if I let it grow back out." I combed my fingers through his hair. "So, we'd match."

"Hey! Shut up!" He really laughed this time and drew me closer to him. "Asshole."

"Don't act like you don't like it."

He chuckled, and he was about to say something, but I brushed a soft kiss across his lips, then went back for more. Theo's other arm snaked around my waist.

The humor faded. The sad, depressing conversation disappeared. Cam's absence became less and less conspicuous as my focus shifted to Theo's presence. To his kiss, his warm body this close to mine, his hands running all over my skin.

Without breaking the kiss, I climbed on top of him, and he pulled me down to him as our cocks hardened between us.

I didn't know what the answer was to bringing Cam and Theo back together. I didn't know if there *was* one.

All I knew was Theo was here now, and I wasn't letting him go before dawn.

Chapter Eight

Cam

The house never felt more conspicuously empty than it did while I waited for Theo to come over. We'd agreed to sit down and talk here at home, and he'd texted me to let me know he was on his way.

I couldn't sit still. Restlessness kept me on my feet, moving from room to room. I'd cleaned the kitchen twice this afternoon. Straightened the already rigidly straight stacks of papers on my desk. Made and remade the bed three times.

On the way through the ground level, as I searched for something to clean or organize, I walked past the closed door to Nate's bedroom. Two steps beyond the door, I paused and backtracked. I didn't go inside. Just put my hand flat on the door, as if that somehow connected me to him.

He didn't even spend a lot of time in that room. He rarely slept in it—when he was home, he nearly always slept upstairs with us. We'd invested in a California king for that very reason. But we'd given him the spare bedroom so he had his own space. When he needed to write or just decompress, it was his.

I took my hand off the door, and my heart sank. The house felt empty as fuck tonight. Nate felt even farther away than he really was. Maybe because I was worried sick that he wouldn't come back. How long would he want to be stuck in the middle while Theo and I sorted our shit out? Were either of them coming back?

Shaking my head, I kept walking. The one thing I was sure of was that without Nate, without Theo, this house felt deserted.

Right then and there, I vowed to myself that if Theo and I did get a divorce, the house was going up on the market. The divorce agreement would probably mandate it anyway, but even if it didn't, we were selling it.

I didn't care where I lived after this—no way in hell was I staying in this house alone.

The sound of a familiar engine raised the hairs on my neck. Just as I expected, the car pulled into the driveway.

I took a deep breath and headed for the front door.

Here goes nothing.

I pulled the door open as Theo was coming up the porch steps.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." I stood aside so he could come in. "Good to see you."

"Yeah. You too."

I'm sure.

I glanced skyward—*a little help here?*—and then took Theo into the kitchen. I poured us each some iced tea, and we moved into the living room.

We sat on opposite ends of the couch, which suddenly seemed massive now that we weren't cuddled up next to each other. As he set his drink on a coaster, Theo eyed my day planner, which was next to the remote as always. Immediately, I braced for a snide comment, but kept his mouth shut.

It was hard to believe that stupid thing—my blue leather-bound planner—had ignited one hell of a fight about a year ago. He'd given me a hard time for insisting on something so outdated and inefficient. I'd tried to brush it off because I didn't want him to know the truth—that the one time my iPad had refused to turn on when I needed to access my schedule, I'd freaked out so badly, I'd vowed to have everything on paper after that. But he'd kept pushing, and I'd finally admitted it, and then he'd asked what I would do if I lost the planner, or if it got wet, or—

I tried not to visibly shudder at the memory. He hadn't just pushed my "what if I lose everything I need" buttons. He'd smacked them like an impatient pedestrian stabbing the crosswalk button. The fact that something as stupid as a day planner had triggered a screaming match that bad didn't instill much faith that we could fix this.

But today, the planner was there in plain sight, and he didn't bring it up.

I folded my hands to keep them still. "So you're going to see Nate next weekend?"

Theo nodded. "Yeah. When are you going to see him?"

"The weekend after. When he's in Nashville."

"Good. Good." He smiled, but it seemed forced. "Guess that'll be good for both of us."

"Yeah. Hopefully."

Silence crept in. I shifted. So did Theo.

"So." He coughed quietly. "How's work?"

I shrugged. "Same as usual. Just signed some new clients, and we're bringing a new therapist into the clinic."

"That's a good sign, right?" His smile seemed slightly more genuine this time. "When you have to bring in someone to help with the workload?"

"Oh yeah. It's great. I just hope we get someone hired soon, because we're all working ourselves into the ground." I paused. "What about you? How are things at the bank?"

He scowled and gave a taut half shrug. "Same shit, different day."

I took a breath and was about to ask about his design work, but

thought better of it. That had sparked a few too many heated arguments. Though I really was genuinely curious how it was going, and if he was even doing any artwork these days, the topic was too incendiary.

I stared down at my hands. What *were* we supposed to talk about? It used to be we could talk about anything and everything, but suddenly there were a shitload of topics that raised hackles and ignited tempers. Tonight was going well—peacefully anyway—and I kind of wanted to keep it that way.

But we needed to be productive too. Gain some sort of ground.

I surreptitiously studied him. He didn't look so great. I probably didn't either, but he was starting to look gaunt. The heavy shadows under his eyes were more pronounced than usual. His cheekbones had always been sharp, and the hollowness of his cheeks made them seem even more so. It was probably my imagination, but I was sure he hadn't had that much gray lightening his temples and sprinkled throughout the rest of his dark hair. Then again, I'd noticed a few more grays of my own over the last week or so.

It was painfully obvious the toll this was taking on us. What wasn't so obvious was how to fix it. In theory, we could just say "forgive and forget" and move on, but in practice, it didn't work that way. There'd been too much tension and explosive fighting to pretend we could turn the page and be back to normal.

I drummed my fingers on my knee. "So, how is your brother doing?"

Theo eyed me. He probably knew damn well I was grasping for something to talk about. Zach and I didn't get along any more than Zach and Theo did, and my concern for how he was doing usually extended to whether or not he could go fuck himself.

Theo played along, though. "He's doing all right. He and Taylor are looking at buying that place. They've been renting it long enough."

"Smart move. The landlord looking to sell?"

"He's thinking about it."

"Well, I'll cross my fingers."

The conversation continued like that—peaceful, but superficial. There was an entire herd of elephants in our living room, but we talked like acquaintances about family, a movie that was coming out in a few months, and whether a particular TV show neither of us really cared about had jumped the shark. The closest we came to even acknowledging—never mind discussing—our situation was comparing notes about where to get the cheapest airfare and hotel rates for visiting Nate.

Around eight, Theo looked at his watch and exhaled. "I guess I

should get out of your hair."

Out of my hair? But we haven't gotten anywhere.

"Early morning?"

He laughed bitterly. "Isn't it always?"

I managed a quiet laugh too. Our eyes met, and…well, that was something. We hadn't gotten anywhere, but we also hadn't fought. So maybe he was right—maybe this was a good time to call it a night. Quit while we were ahead of or something like that. Sure, we hadn't accomplished much if anything tonight, but I had to admit, it was nice to be ending the evening on something other than a sour note. The conversation had been…cordial? Maybe a bit cool and distant, but it wasn't a screaming match. That was something, wasn't it?

Still, it was hard not to feel discouraged. We were both pussy-footing around the hard topics. I was afraid to hit them head-on. I wanted to fight *for* our marriage, but I didn't want to fight *with* him anymore.

"Well." I cleared my throat and stood. "Uh, let me know when you're back in town and you've got some time. We should do this again."

Theo rose. "Yeah. Good idea."

We held each other's gazes for a moment, the air taut between us like there was something that needed to be said. There probably was. It was up to him, though, because I sure as hell didn't know what to say. Somehow I was pretty sure "I love you and I want you to stay" wasn't what he wanted to hear right then. Not until we'd cleared some of the emotional debris that had driven him out the door in the first place.

So I didn't say anything, and after a minute or so, it became clear he wasn't going to speak either. In silence, we headed out of the living room and down the hall.

At the door, he paused. His keys weren't out yet, and he hadn't reached for the doorknob. Rocking from his heels to the balls of his feet, he kept his gaze down.

My stomach clenched. *What are we doing?* We'd never even been this awkward when we were dumb, inexperienced kids who were just starting to date.

Theo lifted his gaze and met mine. "So, it was good to see you. I guess we'll talk more soon?"

I nodded. "Okay. It was good to see you too."

He cracked the faintest smile, and my heart fluttered.

God, I miss you.

To my surprise, he stepped a little closer. Then he hugged me tight, and I couldn't resist returning his embrace. Eyes closed, I let myself take in a deep breath, filling my nose with his familiar scent.

You have no idea, Theo. I miss you so much.

We pulled apart, though we didn't let go completely, and locked eyes.

Fuck it. We came this far.

I touched his face and moved in a little, but paused to see if he'd recoil.

He didn't.

So I moved in closer.

And I kissed him.

Chapter Nine

Theo

Holy. Shit.

I slid my fingers into Cam's hair. Pulled him closer. Opened to the gentle probing of his tongue.

Oh God. It was just like before. His kiss, his touch, his scent filling my nose with every breath. He nudged me back a step, and I took another, dragging him with me until my back hit the wall.

How did I leave this behind?

Reality's icy little claws started prickling along the length of my spine.

I left this behind because everything else is broken.

This is the reason I stayed as long as I did.

And why we let things get so bad before we said enough.

I put a hand on his chest and pushed us apart. "I don't know if we should do this."

Cam blinked. "Why not?"

"We…" I held his gaze. "Everything else is so fucked up. Should we…"

His fingertips brushed my cheek. "The only thing I know right now is I want you, and I—"

I kissed him again. To hell with whether or not this was a bad idea. Everything had felt awful recently, and this felt good, so I wasn't turning back. Regrets were for the morning after.

Cam didn't resist at all. He pressed me harder against the wall, gripping my hair as we kissed like we hadn't done in *ages*. Since well before we'd fallen apart.

He broke the kiss and cupped my face. Panting against my lips, he murmured, "Upstairs?"

"Hell yeah."

He took me by the hand, and I followed without a second thought. That doubtful voice in the back of my mind still tried to be heard, but I was too caught up in the warmth of Cam's fingers between mine, and the anticipation of some long, long overdue sex with him.

I didn't even bother taking in the familiar surroundings of our bedroom. I hadn't been in here in way too long, but the only thing that mattered was the man pulling me across the floor and into bed with him.

He paused just long enough to put his glasses on the nightstand, then lay back across the bed. I landed on top of him, straddling him, and he dragged me down into another kiss. My God, his hands were

all over me now. Running up and down my sides. Combing through my hair. Sliding over my thighs and onto my ass. I'd missed his hands *so fucking much*.

Cam broke the kiss again, this time arching under me and whispering, "Christ…"

I realized then that I'd been rubbing against him, rocking my hips in a gentle pantomime of fucking him. Christ, indeed—he felt amazing. His dick was rock hard, his body heat radiating through our clothes and onto my skin, making me crave his actual touch.

I pushed myself up and stripped off my shirt. Before I'd even tossed that out of the way, Cam was unbuckling my belt, so I started on his too. We peeled off clothes, kicked off shoes, and when we sank onto the bed together again, there was nothing between us except two hard-ons that we desperately needed to do something about.

The roles were reversed now—Cam was on top, and it was my turn to trace every line and contour of his body with my hands. I'd memorized every inch of him a long time ago, and touching him now felt like…

God, it felt like coming home.

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him down to me. I wanted to whisper *I love you*, but I was afraid he'd remember why we hadn't done this in so long, and then we'd be awkwardly getting dressed instead of getting each other off. So I kissed him instead, and held him there, and he was moving the way I'd been earlier—rocking his hips and rubbing his cock against mine enough to create the most amazing friction. Only thing that could make it better…

"Lube," I murmured between kisses. "N-need some—"

"On it." He broke away and lunged for the nightstand. My heart sped up. There were a million things I wanted to do to him and with him, and narrowing it down to one was nearly impossible. Put him on his hands and knees? Jerk him off? Lay him down on his stomach and fuck him slowly until we both lost our minds?

Cam didn't give me a chance to pick, though. He poured some lube in his hand, and before I could find enough breath to ask him what he wanted to do, he stroked the cool liquid onto my cock. Arching my back, I gasped and bit my lip, my head suddenly spinning and my pulse pounding even faster.

"Want you to stay just like that," he said. "And fuck me."

All the air left my lungs. Licking my lips, I nodded. He lifted himself up, and I steadied my cock with a hand around the base. Slowly, I guided him back down, and my breath hitched when the head pressed against his tight entrance.

Cam moaned. He closed his eyes and ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip. I didn't move, just let him ease himself down

while I stared up at him. He was so gorgeous. He'd also looked hot with some five-o'clock shadow, and that sheen of sweat on his chest was—

"Oh fuck," I breathed as the head of my cock slid into him.

He moaned again, eyes still shut, and gradually yielded to me, relaxing enough to take me easily. "You feel so good," he slurred.

"So do you." I ran my hands up his abs and chest. "Great view too."

He opened his eyes, and when he met my gaze, we both grinned. Then he grabbed my wrists and pinned my arms to the pillow.

I gritted my teeth. I couldn't touch him like this, but I was fucking him, and he was riding me, and his strong hands were on me, so I really couldn't complain. I couldn't complain at all. Not when I had this gorgeous view of his powerful body, muscles standing out as he picked up speed, and sure as hell not when I was this deep inside him.

Our eyes locked. The smoldering hunger in his drove me wild. I loved it when he was like this—aggressive, demanding, completely primal and needy. He didn't like it when I fucked him too hard, but when he was on top and had absolute control, he didn't hold back. He rode me so hard, the headboard slammed into the wall with every thrust.

"*God*, yeah," I groaned. "Love that."

"Feel…fucking amazing." He shuddered and clenched around my cock. "Fuck…"

I rocked my hips as much as I could in this position, but my range of motion was too limited. Then he shuddered again, and I jumped at the chance—I wrenched my arms free, grabbed his hips, and thrust up into him.

"Oh yeah." He whimpered and complemented my thrusts. "Oh, fuck, *just* like that." His elbows almost shook out from under him as he shuddered again, and he moaned something that sounded like "Keep going," and then his whole body jolted, and he threw his head back as he came on my stomach.

I clenched my teeth and kept thrusting, and holy fuck—his orgasm, his body, his voice, his *presence*—drove me right over the edge. I pulled him down onto me, burying my cock as deep as he could take me, and came.

Cam slumped over me. My hands slid off his hips and landed on the bed. He lifted himself off me and dropped onto the mattress, and for a moment, neither of us moved. My whole body tingled, my head spinning, and the only thing I was good for was feeling around for his hand, finding it, and clasping our fingers together.

He gripped my hand loosely and ran his thumb alongside mine. We turned toward each other. Grinned. Inched closer. He lifted his

head off the pillow, kissed me softly, and dropped back down again.

After a moment, we were both steady enough to get up and clean ourselves off, but that was the extent of it. As soon as we came back to the bedroom, we collapsed on the rumpled bed. I dropped onto my back. Cam cuddled up beside me, and I wrapped my arm around his shoulders.

Neither of us spoke. We just let the afterglow do its thing, and lay together in comfortable silence.

Slowly, though, my heart sank. An all too familiar ball of lead set up shop in the pit of my stomach. The dust was settling, and slowly the rest of the world was coming back into focus. Our earlier conversation had still happened. The last few hellish months still existed. We were still separated.

I was back in my own house. In my own bed. With my husband resting his head on my shoulder and both of us still breathing hard from some much needed time between the sheets.

But I couldn't make myself believe anything had changed. For a few minutes, we'd ignored everything and fucked like the world was perfect. It wasn't perfect, though, and fucking didn't *make* it perfect.

Whether I liked it or not, we were still in the exact same place we'd been in the hallway just before he'd kissed me—coolly cordial and a million miles apart.

If anything, I realized as I ran my fingers up and down Cam's arm, we'd just made it that much harder to say good-bye.

Chapter Ten

Nate

The tour bus pulled out onto the interstate, and the engine groaned as it picked up speed.

My bandmates were mostly asleep. Charlie, our drummer, was sprawled across the sofa. Jill was still in her bunk last I'd checked. The bassist, Chris, was in a chair, snoring while he blocked out the world with giant noise-canceling headphones.

Not me, though. I'd been restless since all morning, so I hunkered down by a window and sipped my coffee as I gazed out at the passing scenery.

Theo had come to see me last weekend. I'd spent last night with Cam. In fact, he was probably still in the hotel room, killing time somehow until he had to go to the airport. The sex had been great, but I didn't feel so hot about our visit. Like Theo had last weekend, he'd obviously been trying to focus on me and ignore the trouble on the home front. Both had told me the same thing—nothing had changed, but they were still working on it. I wasn't exactly sure what "working on it" entailed, though.

An uncomfortable knot kept growing behind my ribs. I couldn't get comfortable. Couldn't relax. It wasn't even the caffeine—my tolerance for that shit was way too high to be affected by one cup of gas station coffee.

The mile markers whipped past, and we rolled past cornfields and cow pastures in between towns I'd never heard of and one small city I thought I'd seen in a movie. The scenery was dull, but staring out at the passing landscape usually meant I'd daydream, and maybe write a verse or two that came from those daydreams. Sometimes I could manage an entire song during one stretch of highway. Sometimes I'd only get a few good lines. I enjoyed it, though. I fucking loved it—one of my favorite parts of being on the road.

There was no daydreaming happening today. I couldn't sit still. The knot in my chest wouldn't go away. It was kind of like the day after getting eaten alive by mosquitoes—I couldn't get comfortable, and I couldn't think about anything except the relentless *itching*.

This itch wasn't getting scratched. I just squirmed uncomfortably, staring out the window, wishing I could be anywhere but here.

No, not anywhere.

One place in particular.

Home.

I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed.

Home. More than anything in the world, I wanted to be home.

For the first time in three tours, I resented the road, the miles, the calendar. The distance between me and the two men who were hurting like hell right now. I was living my dream, touring the States and singing with my band, but right now, I just wanted to be home.

Except home wasn't there anymore.

Oh, the house was still standing. No doubt nothing had changed in the bedroom they'd given me—a converted downstairs guest room so I could still have some space, because God, they knew me so well. Everything in there was most likely exactly the way I'd left it. And the rest of the house was probably much the same too—Cam couldn't even deal with rearranging the pantry, never mind furniture. He'd probably broken out in hives when Theo had moved a few of his things out. If the separation turned into a divorce and they actually had to divide up seventeen years' worth of stuff, he was going to lose his mind.

For now, though, I suspected little had physically changed. But was it home anymore? For any of us?

I rubbed my eyes. Thank God I wasn't performing tonight. When I was this kind of scatterbrained, I was liable to forget my own lyrics. And fans *loved* that.

And writing lyrics here on the bus? Not a chance. My concentration was shot. I'd encouraged Cam to talk to Theo, but would he? And if he did, what if things went badly? Goddammit. I was asking for a sleepless night and another day of worrying myself sick, which wouldn't bode well for tomorrow night's performance.

My masochistic brain drifted into daydreams, and they were painful ones, like our early days, back when we'd stumbled into each other's lives. Usually, those memories made me nostalgic. How many times had Jill caught me staring off into space, grinning like a tool while I remembered?

Today, it just made me sad. It hurt. But I couldn't stop thinking about it any more than I could shake this itchy uncomfortable feeling.

Meeting Cam and Theo had clearly been fate. My band had accepted a last-minute gig on a Tuesday night at some no-name club I couldn't even recall now. It wasn't our usual crowd, and by the time we'd figured in gas money, we were *almost* breaking even. But a gig was a gig, and we were in no position to turn anything down, so we'd taken it.

Not a lot of people came. Even fewer stayed until the end. We gave it our all because you just never knew when one of the three remaining audience members was a record exec, but the nearly empty room was demoralizing as fuck. After we'd packed up the van, the rest of the band left. To this day, I couldn't say why, but I'd stayed, and

gone back in to get a drink.

There were no record execs in that thin crowd, but it turned out there were a couple of guys at the bar. It wasn't their usual watering hole. They didn't even drink as a general rule. But apparently they'd just had dinner with some former coworkers, and it was the kind of dinner that warranted stopping for a drink before heading home.

According to Theo, when they'd realized there was a band coming up onstage, Cam had groaned and suggested going elsewhere.

"*But I'd caught a glimpse of you while you guys were setting up,*" Theo told me much later. "*So I suggested staying, just to hear a couple of songs.*"

The first time I'd ever laid eyes on them, I'd known they were a couple. They weren't being outwardly affectionate, and neither had GAY tattooed across his forehead. But there was something about them together. Like there was an invisible magnetism between them, a palpable bond.

And I'd been at ease with them from the start. Maybe because they were a couple, so I'd naively assumed any interaction we had would be platonic.

When Cam slid a hand over my leg beneath the bar, he'd stopped my world on a dime, but even then, I'd had no idea that gesture, that first touch, was changing all of our lives.

It was supposed to be a one-night stand. A threesome because God knew we all needed it that night. Every threesome I'd had before had been kind of awkward. With them, it was effortless. To say they rocked my world that night would be a massive understatement. After a long dry spell, I was suddenly having sex with not just two men, but two of the most talented, generous men I'd ever met. That was the night I learned it was possible to come more than once. And that bottoming could be fun. And that topping another guy at the same time was mind-blowing.

When they "happened to be in the neighborhood" for one of my shows two weeks later, they were afraid I would think it was creepy. Quite the opposite—I was thrilled someone had even remembered the name of my band. And judging by the grins they shot me and the drink they bought me…they hadn't just come to hear me sing.

As things had progressed, and I'd started seeing them individually as well as together, I still saw them each as half of Theo-and-Cam. Two complete, unique, incredible parts of one amazing whole. And somehow, the three of us had become Theo-and-Cam-and-Nate. There was no big sit-down to declare that we'd made this shift. No one day I could point to on a calendar and say that was when it happened.

I'd never felt like a third wheel. As a group, we just…worked.

Right up until we didn't.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. They weren't dumping me, though. They'd driven that point home over and over—this breakup was about them, not me.

But how the hell would this work? How did we turn a triangle into a V and not expect it to collapse?

I didn't see any way we could work like this. Every instinct told me to back out, walk away, and save myself the heartache.

But I loved them. God, I loved them. I couldn't choose between them, and the thought of losing both made my heart stop.

Could I keep it from happening, though?

I sighed, my shoulders sinking as I shifted my gaze back to the passing scenery. We were going through some podunk town now. One of those places I'd never heard of. God, I felt a million miles from home. Out in the middle of nowhere, watching the world go by through a big tinted window while I went from city to city and hoped my voice held out and we sold enough T-shirts and CDs, I felt like Los Angeles and our house and their bed was on another planet.

I rested my forehead against the glass. I was an idiot for trying to make this work with Cam, and with Theo. Sooner or later, it was going to come apart. If they couldn't make it work, then neither could we.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. A relationship like that—it had probably been too good to be true from the start. The fact that it had lasted this long was insane.

By the time I'd met the guys, I'd had a handful of things I could call relationships. I'd been a loner most of my life. All through school, I was the kid in the back row scribbling bad poems into a notebook—it had taken my teachers years to figure out I wasn't taking copious notes. My shitty grades should've been a clue, but nobody really seemed to care.

And neither did I. I wanted to write, and I dreamed about getting onstage and being a rock star. My tenth grade choir director finally broke through my stage fright—he made me perform a long solo in front of the entire student body. I'd been scared shitless, but did it anyway, and shocked everybody including myself. I still didn't come out of my shell like I would've if I'd been living in a movie. Hollywood probably would've painted me as the shy guy who just needed that little push, and then I'd suddenly be a social butterfly.

Not so much. Going onstage and singing alone for the first time had been enormous, and it had proven that my dreams of becoming a musician were not far-fetched, but it hadn't changed *me*. My group of friends didn't get any bigger. None of us got any more popular. We just worked a lot harder on getting our band off the ground because suddenly we thought we had potential. Onstage, I found my stride,

and after we all graduated—by the skin of our teeth, aside from Charlie—we poured everything we had into the band.

Music had been my life. Music didn't stress me out the way people did, and didn't ask me to be anything other than who I was. Music didn't cheat on me.

I dated. Not much, but every once in a while, I'd find someone who didn't mind a guy who hated partying and didn't like crowds. We'd fuck for a few weeks until they got bored, and I'd tell myself getting dumped was worth it because I could pull a song or two out of the aftermath.

But for the most part, I was a loner until Cam and Theo came along. Hell, it had taken me until my junior year to even figure out I was gay. Not because I was in denial. I just…hadn't noticed guys *or* girls up until then. None of my relationships—if I could even call them that—lasted beyond a couple of months.

And suddenly, I was with two outgoing, slightly older guys who brought me into their bed and then their marriage. For the first time in my life, I knew what it meant to fall in love with someone, and it was happening twice. Even more surreal—two people had fallen for *me*. They were interested in more than just my dick and my growing connections in the music industry.

When I'd told my band about Cam and Theo, I'd braced myself, expecting them to give me shit. I was a homewrecker. I was being used. I was asking for two or three *albums* worth of depressing post-breakup songs.

But the reaction from all of them had just been "Oh. Well, whatever makes you happy, dude." And they'd meant it. No one had ever tried to talk me out of it or questioned it. I was pretty sure it was because the fact that I'd found an actual boyfriend, never mind *two* of them, had shocked the hell out of my friends. They were always so supportive of my relationship with Cam and Theo because it was a miracle I'd connected that much with *anyone*, so no one was going to question if the trio was a little unorthodox.

On the bus, I pressed my head back against the headrest and sighed.

It wasn't as if things had been smooth sailing from day one. The transition from two husbands and a booty call to two husbands and a boyfriend had been a challenge. We'd all gone into this expecting a little excitement, and falling in love had complicated things.

My first headlining tour hadn't been easy either. Being apart was an adjustment, even on the shorter tours when we were the opening act. When we were suddenly out on the road for longer stretches, it was harder to stay in touch with the guys. Three months in, my insecurities got the best of me. I still couldn't believe we'd been

signed, and I'd been quietly convinced someone would figure out that Alien Emissary and I were a fraud, that we actually sucked and giving us a record deal was a mistake. Every time we went onstage, I was certain we'd be booed off and kicked back into obscurity where we belonged.

At the same time, I'd worried that Cam and Theo would lose interest in me. Having me around as a convenient fuck buddy was one thing, but now that I was barely home, and the only way to see me involved air travel, the novelty wasn't going to last.

When those two flavors of insecurity finally swelled into a full-on breakdown fueled by exhaustion and homesickness, I'd texted the guys to cancel their visit and thrown myself into my music and my performance so that night wouldn't be the night someone figured out we sucked.

The guys had come anyway and insisted I sit down with them face-to-face. I sat down. I broke down. I confessed all the irrational bullshit that had been keeping me awake for weeks on end. How much I was afraid I was hanging by a thread, one "meh" night of sex away from being cut loose.

Before I'd even finished, Cam gathered me in his arms and held me. When I had finished, Theo had cradled my face tenderly in both hands and kissed me softly.

"We both swore we wouldn't do a three-way relationship," Cam said.

"And we sure as hell weren't doing a long-distance one," Theo said.

"But with you," Cam went on, pausing to kiss my temple, "it's a no-brainer. We both love you. And even when you have to be away on tour, we're not going anywhere."

Theo had squeezed my shoulder. "Wherever you go, we'll be waiting for you when you come back."

After that, I'd never doubted my place in our unusual little arrangement.

Things had also been better since Theo had started working for the bank. He hated the job, but the two before it had been worse. When I met them, he'd been working for a credit union, and between the low pay and his asshole boss, he'd been tearing his hair out. A few months later, he was laid off and went to work for a different credit union, but the two-hour commute wasn't worth the pittance they paid him.

Three years ago, he'd left the credit union and gone to work for the place he was now. And he still hated it, but it was a solid company and a somewhat better paycheck. Less stress for him, anyway.

My career had taken off. So had Cam's. No one was sweating from

one paycheck to the next—though I had quickly learned that a record deal, a platinum album, and a headlining tour did *not* mean rolling in money—and everything was looking bright. I'd reached my dream. I was in love. I didn't dare take any of it for granted, and I was grateful every single day for all of it, but it felt like something that was in for the long haul. One of those buildings built to the strictest earthquake codes and fucking *ready* for anything that came its way.

But an iceberg had found a way to sink the *Titanic*, and Theo and Cam found a way to unravel, and now I was floating in the ice-cold water, wondering what the hell happened.

Staring out at the bland landscape, I exhaled hard, fogging up the window.

Nothing about this seemed right. Maybe I was in denial, but I couldn't make myself believe that Theo and Cam were done.

There *had* to be a way to save their marriage.

From here, though, I could do nothing. Absolutely nothing. I could hope and pray that they sorted things out tonight, and that this was just a blip in the timeline that we'd one day look back on and laugh about.

Sitting here on a tour bus in the middle of God knew where, I felt about as useful as someone pacing outside an emergency room door. There were people on the other side—out of sight and out of earshot—doing everything they could, and all I could do was hope they did the right things to get the heart beating again. I could pace. I could pray. I could mentally prepare for the worst, convince myself I was ready if the doctor came out and said "I'm sorry," but there was nothing I could *do*.

I'd never been this powerless in my life. I couldn't even channel it into a song and make something good out of it.

All I could do was wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Chapter Eleven

Cam

My flight's not leaving until eleven fifty? What the fuck?

Heart racing, I stared at the list of flights. Five minutes ago, the departure time had been eleven thirty. Half an hour ago, it was eleven fifteen.

Shit. Oh shit. I knew I should've taken that red-eye last night.

But then I wouldn't have had this morning with Nate. Though now that delicious, lazy sex made me feel stupid and guilty. I'd indulged in a long morning with him even though I should have left last night and been on the ground in Los Angeles hours ago.

Idiot. What did you think would happen?

Some movement and voices caught my attention, and I looked toward the podium right as the cheery woman picked up the mic.

"Thank you for waiting, ladies and gentlemen," the woman behind the counter said over the loudspeaker. "We apologize to the passengers on the Denver flight. We're looking at a delayed departure due to a late inbound aircraft. We'll update you as soon as we can."

All around me, people were getting grumbly and twitchy. Calls were made. Texts were sent. Heads were shaken.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. Delayed inbound aircraft? So we didn't even have a plane yet? And when it did arrive, it still had to land, taxi, and unload. The new crew had to be brought on board. Luggage. Meals, if a flight this short had them. Cleaning. What if there was a malfunction?

I craned my neck to look out the window. The sky was still clear. A few clouds in the distance, but they seemed benign. So the weather wouldn't suddenly go to shit, right? *Right?*

Tearing my gaze away from the blue sky, I looked at my watch. It was eleven thirty. We were supposed to leave at eleven fifty.

Still no plane.

Shit. *Shit*. If my flight was delayed any more, I'd miss my connection. As it was, I'd be cutting it close. What if we didn't get to the gate right away? Or if I couldn't get off the plane fast enough? I was familiar with the Denver International Airport. It was enormous. Sometimes I'd get lucky and my gates would be right across from each other. Sometimes…not so much. How far was it between gates?

I pulled up my phone and checked my flight. Delayed another ten minutes.

According to the app, the gate I'd be pulling into and the one I'd be flying out of—on time, no less—were only six gates apart.

All right. Close enough. At least they were in the same wing of that gigantic airport.

But how many gate changes have I heard over the loudspeaker? What if one of my gates changes? Especially since this flight is late? Would that affect things? Would they just put us wherever there was room or—

Blood pounded in my ears so hard it drowned out the terminal's background noise. My knees were shaking, and the edges of my vision were starting to darken, so I closed my eyes and focused on breathing. If I missed my connector, there would be others. I could still get home.

I'd just be late. Way late. Late enough to fuck with my appointments? Oh shit. My clients wouldn't be thrilled. And there were too many other massage therapists in Los Angeles who'd be more than happy to step in if I left a client hanging. Then word would start getting around.

Cameron Haines, the flakiest massage therapist in LA.

I wrung my hands. They were sweaty as hell. Fuck. Though my heart was beating faster, I concentrated on breathing as slowly and deeply as I could.

It wasn't helping.

No matter how deeply I inhaled, it wasn't enough. There wasn't enough oxygen in this building. But I couldn't go outside. And pretty soon—*not soon enough*—I'd be on a plane with even *less* air.

Get it together, Cam. Come on.

I *had* to get it together. Icy panic slithered up my spine and through my veins, closing my throat and shrinking my lungs.

Oh God. It was starting. The spiral. The one that scared the hell out of me—when I could feel the panic attack coming on, and I knew it was coming, and I knew what it was, and I'd try to talk myself down, and I'd get even more worked up because it wasn't working and now I was panicking about the panic attack and then the panic took over and I fucking lost it anyway…

Breathe, Cam. Breathe. Don't think about anything else.

There was literally nothing I could do to change the situation. My plane wasn't here. My flight was going to be delayed. It was what it was. Things would work out, and I would get home, but for now, I was in the hands of a pilot, a control tower, weather, wind, physics, and God knew how many other things, and could do nothing except sit here and wait.

As I drummed my sweaty fingers on my suitcase handle, I realized my hands were shaking. And my knees were shaking. And my heart was going a million miles an hour. Was I sweating all over now?

Jesus. Relax. It's just a delayed flight.

A delayed fight that'll make me miss my next flight and keep me from getting home in time to take care of tomorrow's clients so I might—

Oh holy shit. What's wrong with me? Why can't I breathe?

I took a seat, cradled my face in my hands, and pulled in a long breath through my nose.

There. See? Air. Got this. Not gonna die.

I grabbed on to that thought and refused to let it go. As long as I could tell myself over and over that I wasn't going to die, I could talk myself down before I had a full-on panic attack. Once I couldn't hold it back anymore, then I'd fall apart and probably wind up on the floor in a shaking mess, convinced I was seconds away from a fatal heart attack.

This really where you want it to happen? In a fucking airport?

No. Not here. Not today. Not like this.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Not dying. I'll be all right.

Not dying. Not dying. Not dying.

I repeated that mantra over and over in my head. Quickly at first, then slower, coaxing my heartbeat into following suit.

Little by little, the panic passed. I was fine. Still edgy and twitchy, but no longer in danger of a full-on collapse as long as nothing else came along and triggered it.

This was one of those times when I would've killed to have Theo by my side. When things were good between us, just having him there had a calming effect. I could calibrate myself to him—as long as he was calm and collected, so was I. He couldn't begin to know how many times he'd brought me in off a ledge simply by being there.

Like when our flight to Maui had hit some of that turbulence that made it feel like the plane was going down. He'd casually put a hand on his Coke can to keep it from spilling and kept right on reading. I'd focused on him. Even though every bump and lurch made my pulse speed up—*shit we're gonna die we're gonna die*—I told myself that as long as Theo wasn't worried, there was no reason for me to worry.

Then there was that time day seven years ago that I would never forget.

The announcement had come out of nowhere. No one had suspected a thing, and suddenly, the top dozen or so people at the bank were being led out of the building in handcuffs. Those of us remaining were called into an all-hands meeting. The company had been under investigation for fraud. Damning evidence had been found against the top brass—a few months later, they'd go to jail for *years*.

Justice would be served eventually, but the pink slips went out that very day. How long this had been brewing, I had no idea, but once the hammer dropped, it happened fast. By the time Theo and I would normally have been heading out to lunch together, we were cleaning out our desks.

In silence, we drove home. No radio. No conversation. I didn't even take out my phone while Theo inched through mid-afternoon traffic.

I didn't envy our former coworkers. They'd have to go home and tell their spouses. Or call them. Whatever. My spouse already knew. By the time we walked into our house, the shock was starting to wear off, the truth was sinking in, and still, neither of us said a word. We were both scared shitless. Neither of us had any idea where to go from here. We just…didn't know.

So we fucked.

It started with a "well, what now?" stare-down in the kitchen. Then I grabbed Theo's tie, pulled him to me, and kissed him, because I couldn't think of anything else that wouldn't make me feel worse. Theo didn't miss a beat. He shoved me up against the counter, and we made out like we hadn't done in ages. His dick rubbed against mine. I gripped the back of his head and refused to let him go. He gathered handfuls of my shirt and kept me perfectly still while he kissed me so hard, it bordered on violent. And I loved it. God, yes. I'd been halfway out of my mind with worry, and now I wanted him to drive me the rest of the way out of it.

Rock hard, breathless, shaking, he panted, "I think we're gonna need some lube."

"I think you're right."

We barely made it out of the kitchen before the clothes started coming off. All through the house that we were suddenly in danger of losing, we kissed. Groped. Unbuttoned. Unbuckled. Unzipped.

Stumbling over each other and our clothes, we made it up the stairs. Down the hall. Into our bedroom.

There, Theo turned me around roughly and bent me over the mattress. With his knee, he pushed my legs apart.

Oh yes. Like where this is going.

"Don't move," he growled, and let go of me.

I wasn't moving. I was staying right here until he was good and done with me. As he put on some lube, I clawed at the comforter, grabbing handfuls of it like he'd done with my shirt, and begged him to hurry the fuck up.

"Getting there." The lube bottle clicked. Then landed on the bed beside me like a spent ammo casing.

Oh yes…yes…fuck!

The head of his cock slid into me. It burned a little—he'd been careful, but we hadn't done much in the way of prepping—and I didn't care.

Let it hurt, just don't let it stop.

"Jesus…" he breathed, and pushed himself deeper. "God, Cam…"

I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead into the mattress. He'd positioned me so I couldn't move at all. Literally all I could do was let him fuck me, and holy hell, he fucked me. We'd had sex millions of times, but this was like going back to the beginning—back to our frantic early days when every waking moment was spent in bed and we couldn't get enough of each other. When nothing took my mind off a stressful exam like being pinned beneath Theo while he drove his cock into me until neither of us could move.

"You gotta admit," he ground out, "this beats the hell out of a staff meeting."

I laughed, and my head spun even faster. I was damn near giddy. Delirious. The stress of losing my job was still there but distant. Completely irrelevant. Replaced by the devious feeling of being bent over and ridden during working hours. "We should…come home early…and fuck more often."

"Oh, I like the way you think." He leaned down and dug his teeth into my shoulder, the pain drawing a whimper and a shiver out of me. Yeah. Next jobs? Definitely playing hooky and fucking once in a while.

Theo grunted. His rhythm fell apart. He fucked me faster, hard enough that each thrust shoved the bed a fraction of an inch across the floor. "Holy…fuck!"

Right then, when I knew he was *right* there, I clenched around him and was rewarded with a roar that probably turned our neighbors' heads. He forced himself as deep as I could take him, the bed shifting far enough to knock us both slightly off balance, and moaned as he came inside me.

With one last shudder, he slumped over the top of me and panted against my shoulder. He took a few gulps of air, then whispered, "T-turn over. On your back."

I knew what that meant, and just thinking about it, I *almost* came.

He pulled out. My legs were shaky as hell, but that didn't stop me from climbing onto the bed. I lay back on the pillows, and as Theo joined me on the mattress, he met my gaze. He grinned, then leaned down and ran his tongue along the underside of my cock. Slowly, lightly, he drew it from the base to the head, and there, he made heart-stopping little circles. I gripped the sheets, arching and squirming as he teased me with his tongue, then took my cock into his mouth a little at a time. He was in no hurry, but he didn't have to be. As turned on as I was, I had to fight to keep from coming.

Then he pushed my legs apart.

Oh yes. God yes.

Theo shifted onto one arm. As he teased me with his mouth, he slid two fingers into my ass, and he fucked me with them at the exact

same speed he bobbed his head on my dick. No, this was not gonna last long, and I gave up fighting. I wanted it to last because I loved his mouth, and I loved being naked in bed with him, and I loved ignoring all the shit I didn't want to deal with, but what he was doing felt too good to ruin by holding back.

So I didn't.

"That's perfect," I murmured. "Keep…*oh*, yeah."

My breath caught. Theo curved his fingers just right, and his lips and tongue worked even more magic on the head of my cock, and the whole world exploded. I might've yelled out his name or come up off the bed, but I wasn't sure and didn't care. The only thing that mattered was my husband driving me all the way out of my mind and stroking and licking and sucking until I nudged him away with a shaking hand.

He stopped. I collapsed onto the pillows.

"Fuck…" I licked my lips. "That was…"

"Speechless." He grinned as he sat up. "Just the way I like you."

I laughed, sounding about as drunk as I felt. Then he came up to kiss me, and I pulled him down into my arms.

"I needed that," I said.

"Me too."

We kissed lazily for a moment. When the dust had settled and we'd caught our breath, we cuddled up in the middle of our bed. How long had it been since we'd had sex in the middle of the day? Never mind on a weekday? I didn't know. But it was about damned time even if the circumstances weren't so great.

Reality crept back in, reminding me why we were here at all, lazing away the afternoon instead of chugging coffee to get through our high-adrenaline job.

Lying face to face, we were quiet for a long time until I finally said what we were probably both thinking: "What do we do now?"

"I don't know." He clasped our fingers together between our chests. "I guess we update our résumés and start putting out applications."

My heart pounded. "The economy's in the shitter. Getting hired again could take…shit, that could take weeks."

Theo nodded and calmly said, "We'll be okay. We've got enough cash to last us for a little while."

I exhaled, watching my thumb run back and forth along his. He was right. When we'd started thinking about buying a house, we'd gotten into the habit of keeping money socked away. Homeowner's insurance or not, the thought of being hit with an expensive emergency—a dead appliance, a ruptured pipe, any disaster I could imagine—without the means to repair it immediately had scared the

hell out of me. Theo had put my mind at ease with a financial plan, and by the time we'd actually closed on this house, we had almost ten grand in an emergency fund. Over time, we'd added to it, and though I hadn't looked recently, we probably had well over twenty by now.

So even with our paychecks vanishing, we could still eat. We could still cover the mortgage. We weren't going to be living out of our cars until the repo man came along and took those too.

I met his gaze. "You're right. We probably won't be out on the street overnight."

Theo smiled, that smile that was equal parts boyish and knowing. "No, we won't. And hey, you've talked about changing careers. Maybe now's a good time."

I raised my eyebrows. "But that would mean going back to school. Spending money and not—"

He cut me off with a soft kiss. Settling back onto the pillow, he whispered, "I want you to be happy. This might be your shot at finding a career that *makes* you happy. Why not take advantage of it?"

My pulse sped up again. "I haven't even looked into schools. Or decided on what I want to do. I—"

"Relax. Up until today, we both thought we'd be working there until we retired. Just look into it. You don't have to figure it out right this second."

"True." I swallowed. "I should at least put some feelers out for work, too."

"It's up to you. If you want to go back to school full-time, we'll make that work." Smiling again, he trailed his fingertips down my cheek. "We'll get through this."

"I know."

He was right. Though it wasn't easy, I changed careers, Theo found another job, we didn't lose the house, and eventually we replenished the emergency money we'd lived off during that period of unemployment. He'd said we'd get through it, and we had.

In my uncomfortable airport seat, I casually wiped my eyes, hoping the other passengers didn't notice.

That memory seemed like something out of a movie. Something that had been scripted, rehearsed, and performed to perfection. It was surreal—finding comfort in Theo's arms, not having to fight off a goddamned panic attack, not fighting *him*. I missed the days when he could convince me things would be okay. I missed the days when we were okay.

Christ. No wonder I was a wreck these days. This was the first time in seventeen years that I'd had to face down a crisis without Theo. We'd had our fights and slammed our fair share of doors, but those had been more irritating than worrisome. Just part of being

married and living together. Such was life. In the back of my mind, even when we'd reached that point of shouting and not listening to each other, I'd been absolutely certain we'd work it out.

Jesus, Theo.

What happened to us?

* * * * *

The instant the flight touched down, I did the same thing everyone else did—phone out, airplane mode off.

I wasn't checking e-mail or social media, though. I went straight to my text messages and typed one out to Theo:

Can we talk?

I pressed send without a second thought. Now I could freak out—and I would—but at least the message was sent and couldn't be pulled back.

After a short visit with Nate, and spending the whole flight thinking about this mess we were all in, I'd decided Nate was right. I needed to see Theo. We'd spent enough time apart. The last time we'd seen each other hadn't been bad, but it wasn't productive either. The sex had been an easy diversion, and since then…nothing. We needed to see each other and talk, and hell, maybe we'd wind up in bed together. I wondered if it was possible to rekindle our marriage one desperate fuck at a time.

So if he was willing, we'd talk. Maybe sleep together. Maybe get somewhere.

All I knew was that I needed to see him.

I needed to talk to him.

And more than anything…

I missed him.

Chapter Twelve

Theo

When had driving become this exhausting? On my way to the restaurant to meet with Cam, there was surprisingly little traffic, but just navigating the familiar freeways and side roads was more draining than usual. Big surprise. The whole day had been draining.

I hadn't expected to be able to concentrate today, but I'd thought my distraction would be because of meeting with Cam tonight. Hell, maybe it was. Except all day long, I hadn't been thinking about Cam. Or our meeting. Or our separation. Or even Nate.

I hadn't been thinking about *anything*. The whole fucking day, my mind had been completely blank. Like someone had taken out my brain and replaced it with an opaque liquid.

Maybe it was just a little leftover jetlag from my trip to see Nate, even if that had been a week ago. And I *had* been under some extra stress lately. I rubbed the back of my neck. Whatever this was, at least it hadn't kicked in while I'd been with Nate. Or rather, thank God I'd been able to keep it under the surface. We'd still had a great time, and we'd still had plenty of sex, and with any luck, he hadn't noticed how much I'd just wanted to pull the covers over my head and disappear from the world for a while. If I could act the part when I was around him, then maybe I wasn't losing my mind completely.

Driving down the freeway, I gnawed my lip. Something *was* wrong with me. Throughout the day, I'd surreptitiously watched my coworkers. None of them moved like they had lead weights in their bones. They walked. Talked. Laughed. Breathed like their ribs weren't trying to expand against a big, immovable boulder.

I shook myself and turned my attention back to my road.

Why was I freaking out so much? This was normal. I was separated from my husband and I was dealing with the stress of my long-distance relationship with my—our—boyfriend. It sucked, and it made me want to call in sick for the duration, but it was normal. And I'd get through it. Just like everyone else who'd ever been through a div—trial separation.

I knew why I was freaking out right now, though. I'd been to job interviews that could make or break a career. I'd faced down exams that stood between me and a life-changing degree. I'd stood in front of friends and family and recited vows.

And I had *never* been as nervous as I was right then, getting ready to face down the man whose bed I missed sharing.

We'd texted back and forth this afternoon as he was flying in from

wherever he'd met up with Nate, and we'd agreed to meet here at a low-key bistro near Hollywood Boulevard. I hadn't been here before. Maybe that was a good thing—better to do this on completely neutral territory than sour a favorite restaurant. Or, worse, do it at home, wind up in bed again, and feel worse just like last time. Yeah, neutral territory was the way to go.

It was weird to think about seeing him right after he'd visited Nate. And not long after I'd visited Nate myself. This was strangely like when my parents had divorced and my brother and I had started spending weekends at our dad's place. Nothing made it real like actually living two lives—one with him, one with her.

Was that what we were doing to Nate? Of course he wasn't our kid. He was a grown adult just like us, and had been fully a part of our relationship, but now he was in a very similar position to what Zach and I had been in back then. Divided between two people who couldn't hold it together anymore. Did he worry that he was somehow responsible? Or that either of us loved him less?

The parallels between my parents divorcing and my current separation were unsettling. I knew all too well what it was like to be caught in the middle. Problem was, I hadn't been able to figure out a solution back then, and I couldn't think of one now.

Except, of course, the obvious one—getting back together with Cam.

So I'd been relieved as hell when he'd texted me and asked about meeting up, but I was also nervous.

And now I was here. I parked, walked a few blocks to the restaurant, and—with no idea what to expect—walked inside to meet Cam.

He was at a booth along the far wall, and gave me a nod as I started toward him.

"Hey," he said when I was close enough. "Thanks for coming."

"Don't mention it." I sat across from him. "So how was your flight?"

"Not bad. Good thing my connection was delayed."

"Yeah?"

Cam nodded. "Would've missed it if not. My first flight was…" He rolled his eyes. "Our plane literally pulled up to the gate almost ninety minutes late."

I grimaced. "Jesus. But you made it?"

"Somehow, yeah," he muttered, and sipped his drink.

I glanced at the glass he was holding, then did a double take at the thin black straws and the thin brown liquid. "When did you start drinking again?"

His eyes darted toward it, and he set it on the table. "It's just been

a rough day."

"So you're—"

"Please," he said so softly it barely carried over the restaurant's noise. "Don't."

I gritted my teeth. He'd been a heavy drinker in college, something we'd argued about way back then, but he'd given it up years ago. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him drink, which was probably why I noticed it now.

"So, um." I forced myself not to glare at the half-empty glass. "How's Nate doing?"

Cam squirmed subtly. "He's good. Good. Kind of, um…" He met my gaze, but then let his eyes dart toward the table. "Stressed. About what's going on with us."

I know the feeling, Nate.

"Can't blame him."

He nodded. "But the tour's going well, and…" Cam looked at me again. "You're seeing him again soon, aren't you?"

"This weekend."

"He's looking forward to it." Cam smiled faintly. "I'm glad you guys will be meeting up."

"Yeah, me too."

We held each other's gazes, but then both of us looked away. I tamped down the jealousy that tried to come to the surface—so he'd been with Nate last night? It'd be my turn soon. Nate was probably the one thing we hadn't fought over. From the start, we'd agreed that the only thing that changed where Nate was concerned was that we didn't go visit him together. Once the tour was over and Nate was back in town, well, it might get a bit more complicated, but we'd figure it out. Right now, though, it was off-limits. The subject of Nate was the closest we had to a demilitarized zone, and it needed to stay that way.

Question was—what were we here to discuss?

I rested my elbow on top of the unopened menu. "So, you wanted to talk?"

"Yeah." He cradled his drink in both hands. "I just, um, think…" He paused for a long moment. The last time we saw each other, we didn't get very far."

"No, we didn't."

"So, I guess I wanted to see if we could meet up and try again. Without ending on a bad note."

"Okay." My mouth had gone dry. I wasn't going to *drink*, but I definitely needed something, so I glanced around and flagged down a waiter. He acknowledged me with a nod. While I waited for him, I faced Cam again. "Anything in particular you want to talk about?"

"Us?"

Well, that narrowed it down. "Which part?"

Cam stared at the table. So did I. My heart pounded, as if to emphasize the silence hanging between us. He was impossible to read. Was he trying to figure out what we needed to talk about? Or struggling to put something into words? Which of those options was the lesser of two evils?

Right then, the waiter showed up, and I ordered a Sprite. God bless the man, he also brought me some ice water, so at least I had something until my soda came.

"Do you gentlemen still need a minute to look at the menu?"

There's a menu? Oh. Right.

"Yes." I faked a smile. "Probably a few minutes."

"Take your time," he said with a smile that was probably equally genuine. "I'll come by and check on you in a bit."

"Thanks."

He left us to our uncomfortable silence.

Cam chewed his lip. He swirled his drink for a moment. Then as he lifted it, he said, "Well, we—"

"Do you still love me?"

His hand stopped with his drink halfway to his lips. Eyes locked on mine, he lowered it back to the table. "Are you…are you really asking me that?"

"Yes." I forced myself to hold his gaze, but goddamn, it was a struggle. "I think it's relevant. Don't you?"

"Of course it's relevant. Just seems like the answer should be obvious."

I couldn't stop myself and broke eye contact. Focusing on the placemat in front of me, I whispered, "I don't want to make any assumptions. If we're going to talk, then I don't see why—"

"Yes." His voice was soft, but the word hit me like a shockwave. When I lifted my gaze again, he leaned over his arms on the table and said, "Yes. I still love you." The sincerity in his voice and his eyes was unmistakable. I believed him. Completely.

"So do I," I said. "I've never stopped loving you."

Please believe me.

I didn't have any reason to think he didn't believe me.

But what now? I couldn't ignore that those words didn't magically bridge the gap we'd carved between us. I'd told Nate that I couldn't imagine ever not loving Cam, and that hadn't changed. But the separation had still happened, and even now, as Cam and I exchanged *I love yous* across a small table in an intimate restaurant, the separation still existed.

We still love each other. What if that's not enough?

I took a drink to wet my dry mouth. “So, where do we go from here?”

Cam sighed, shaking his head. “No idea. I mean, we love each other, but does that mean we can live together?”

“We lived together for a long time.”

“People change.” He didn’t sound argumentative, like he was pushing for us to stay apart. If anything, he sounded sad. Maybe resigned. And somehow, that made it worse. We weren’t going to fix this unless we both worked at it, and if one of us gave up…

I shifted uncomfortably.

Before I could speak, Cam beat me to the punch. “Okay, I’m just throwing this out there.” He sat up again, folding his hands on the table. “Aside from last time, whenever we’ve seen each other lately, we’ve been arguing or talking about splitting up or getting back together or…anyway. Maybe what we need to do tonight is just have dinner. And talk about other stuff.”

“Other stuff? Such as?”

He shrugged. “Anything other than our problems?”

“Seems like that’s just ignoring our problems.”

“It is.” He gave a slight nod. “And I’m wondering if that’s what we need to do. Even if it’s just for tonight.” Cam exhaled slowly. “Take a breather from all the conflict and just try…*being* together.”

That actually sounded pretty fucking good. Better than the alternative, that was for sure.

“Okay,” I said. “So, um.” I tapped the menu. “Should we get something to eat?”

Cam managed a very, very slight smile and nodded. “Good idea.”

While we perused the menus and the waiter took our orders, I mentally scrambled for a topic of conversation. Something that wasn’t an emotional minefield. We couldn’t even talk about Nate. It was bad enough that Nate wasn’t here—God, I missed him—but just mentioning his name made the air colder.

After the waiter was gone, Cam met my gaze. “So, how has work been?”

Oh. Yeah. That was a nice, relaxing topic. I focused on unfolding my napkin and laying it across my thigh. “It’s been busy. Kind of dull, but…busy.”

“Well, that’s good.” He paused. “Right?”

The napkin was where it needed to be, so I couldn’t justify staring at it anymore. I lifted my gaze. “Yeah, it’s good. What about you? Seems like you’ve had a full schedule lately.”

Cam nodded, his mouth curving into a slight smile. “Pretty full, yeah. And there’s a bunch of seminars coming up, so hopefully I can make it to a few of those.”

"Good. That'll be…good." Well, wasn't I the eloquent one tonight?

My husband watched me for a moment. "You're tense."

"Nervous," I whispered.

"Theo." He leaned closer, smiling a little. "It's me. I know things aren't great right now, but…"

"I know. And I feel like an idiot." I blew out a breath. Scratching my neck, I said, "Look, there is one thing that's kind of bothering me. And maybe we should get it out in the open."

"Sure. Of course." He folded his hands on the table. "What's on your mind?"

Please don't let me be stepping on a mine…

"Listen, um." I cleared my throat. "The last time we met up. Things kind of got…out of hand."

Cam's eyebrows climbed. "You mean, ending up in bed?"

I nodded.

He swallowed. "I guess I thought that was a positive step."

"It…" I chewed my lip, drumming my fingers on the table. "I guess it was? But it also kind of wasn't." I braced for him to roll his eyes or sigh with exasperation, but he just tilted his head a little.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean sex was one of the things we always got right. Even when everything else was starting to fall apart. And I think…" My shoulders sagged under a weight that wasn't really there. "I guess I'm worried we'll get caught up in being physical together again, and…"

"And not focus on fixing everything else?"

I winced. "Yeah. Now that I've said it out loud, it sounds kind of stupid."

"No. Not really." He exhaled. "To tell you the truth, I can see your point. I'm kind of surprised I didn't see it before."

For all the times I'd wished he wouldn't argue with me, why did he have to agree this time?

He sat back, frowning and looking anywhere but right at me. "I guess because it felt good, I didn't want anything to be wrong with it, but you're totally right. And maybe it did make us lose sight of what we should be working on, which is…" He gestured at each of us. "This."

"Yeah." I moistened my lips. "So maybe we should take if off the table for now."

Cam nodded. "That's a good idea."

Relief and disappointment vied for dominance in my tightening chest. Avoiding his eyes, I said, "I guess it's the best thing. For now."

"Just until we sort things out," he whispered.

I lifted my gaze and searched his.

You mean if *we sort things out.*

Cam swallowed. So did I.

And silence fell. Heavy, uncomfortable, immovable *silence*.

I took a drink. “So, um…” I set the glass down. “Tell me about these seminars…”

* * * * *

We kept the conversation benign for the rest of dinner. On the one hand, it was good. No fighting. On the other, it wasn’t great. No progress.

But at least when it came time to leave, we walked out peacefully instead of someone storming out and slamming a door. Not that we were prone to the door-slamming part in public, but an abrupt, angry departure wasn’t out of the question. And out here, we couldn’t drag each other into bed either.

Still, it was weird to walk out quietly, say good-bye like a couple of friends or colleagues, and then get into separate cars to go separate directions.

As I drove toward my brother’s house, I couldn’t relax. It had been a relatively pleasant dinner—not fighting, not sniping—so I should’ve felt better than when I’d arrived, but I felt worse. From the moment we’d met seventeen years ago, Cam and I had hit it off. We’d had chemistry that was visible from space, and we talked like old friends from the start.

Tonight, I was pretty sure I knew what it would feel like to be stuck in a malfunctioning elevator with a stranger with whom I could find nothing in common. Just two people in a smallish space, making the most superficial small talk possible, trying to fill the time and silence with words that meant nothing.

I didn’t know how to be strangers with Cam.

And in our brief moment of discussing something that wasn’t stilted and superficial, we’d severed one of the ties that kept us from being just friends or acquaintances. Sex was off the table now. From here on out, things were platonic until we either fixed our marriage or ended it.

That should’ve made things easier. Without sex to fall back on, we could focus on what needed to be sorted out.

Instead, it left me one step further removed from the man I’d planned to share my life with.

This isn’t going to end well, is it?

* * * * *

I’d known eventually it would happen, and tonight, it finally did.

A few days after my dinner with Cam, I was two thousand miles away, tangled up naked beneath the sheets with Nate, and I just…

Couldn't.

My dick was hard, and my pulse was racing, but my heart wasn't in it. Nate deserved so much better, but it was all I had, so I tried to fake it. I kissed him, I touched him, I did everything I could to turn him on.

But then Nate lifted his head, and as soon as our eyes met, the jig was up.

"You okay?" he asked.

Sighing, I wiped a hand over my sweaty face. "I'm…I'm sorry. I don't think I can do this tonight."

Nate eased himself down beside me and laced our fingers together. "Jetlag?"

I wish.

"No. I mean kind of. But…"

"Stress?"

"The stress is definitely not helping." Jesus. We'd gone from sex to zero in a matter of seconds, and now I felt even lower than I had before he'd walked in the door. No relief whatsoever that the pressure was off. Now I was disappointed, defeated, more than a little embarrassed that I couldn't please Nate the way I wanted to.

"Theo." He rested his hand on my chest. "What's going on?"

I took a deep breath. "This happens sometimes. I thought I could shake it off before I got here, but…"

"*What* happens?" He tipped up my chin so our eyes met. "What's wrong?"

"I…" There was no point in hiding it, was there. Sighing, I settled on my back, and Nate rested his head on my chest. "It's not just sex. There are days when I can't even move."

He pulled the covers up over both of us and faced me on his side. "The separation getting to you?"

I tried not to flinch but failed. "Some days are worse than others. I guess today is…" Fuck, I couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Theo?"

I swallowed. "To be honest, there've been days like this for a while. Even before Cam and I separated."

Nate pushed himself up on his elbow and held my gaze, brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, sometimes physically, I'm just…"

"Like, you're in pain?"

"No. Not…not really. Nothing *hurts*. But simple things like getting out of bed or driving to the office, they just take so…much…*work*."

Nate blinked.

I moistened my lips. “If you’ll forgive me letting my *Star Wars* nerd show, the closest thing I can compare it to is being encased in carbonite. You’re alive. You’re there. But you can’t do anything.” I let my own words bounce around in my head, then laughed humorlessly. “God, it sounds so stupid.”

“Not really, no.” Nate slid closer and draped his arm over me. “Have you ever been treated for depression?”

“I’m not taking drugs.”

“Doesn’t have to be drugs. But maybe a therapist or—”

“I’ll worry about it when I get back to LA.” I trailed my fingertips down his cheek. “Right now, I just want to be with you.” I cringed. “And I’m sorry about tonight. I—”

“Theo.” He propped himself up on his elbow again and looked in my eyes. “Why are you apologizing?”

“You came here so we could spend time together. In bed.”

“You had it right the first time—I came so we could spend time together. The sex is fun, but I just want to *be* with you.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I miss you.”

Those three words almost broke me, and as I pulled him closer, I whispered, “I miss you too.” I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed my eyes shut.

Especially now. I don’t have Cam anymore, but if I lose you…

He kissed me softly. “The only reason we’re hiding in a hotel room is there’s too many reporters out there. Honestly, I wish we could just go out. Grab dinner. Something.”

“I know. I would love to do that.”

It wasn’t possible, though. Not without raising suspicions. If we were seen together in Los Angeles, the press usually wrote it off as Nate hanging out with some friends. If they started seeing a pattern of me or Cam showing up in various cities and going places with Nate, even if there was never any physical contact, then rumors would start. And Nate didn’t need that. Not that Cam or I needed it either, but I wasn’t about to add to Nate’s stress. No more than I already had.

So the odd hotel room rendezvous was the best we could do until his tour was over.

“Well.” I touched his face. “We can’t go out, so I guess this is the best we can do.”

“It’s fine by me.” He smiled. “I just want to be with you.”

I pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. “Me too.”

“Do you want to just grab some pizza and watch a movie?”

“I think we could do that.” I kissed him again, this time on the mouth, and let it linger for a moment. Nate wriggled a little closer, but then jumped when his cock brushed my hip.

“Sorry. I—”

"Don't be." I reclaimed his lips and slid a hand down between us. He was getting hard again, and moaned when I wrapped my fingers around his cock. As I started stroking, his hips start moving, rocking in time with my hand, and in no time, he was fully erect.

I broke the kiss and pressed my forehead to his. "You didn't think I'd leave you unsatisfied, did you?"

"You…" He shivered, fucking frantically into my hand. "You never do."

"Damn right." I gripped him tighter, stroked him faster, and was rewarded with a strangled moan and a full-body shudder.

Nate grabbed the back of my neck and kissed me hungrily, forcing my mouth open and demanding access with his tongue. His fingers dug into my skin. His cock got even harder in my hand.

With a gasp, he broke the kiss. "Fuck…"

"Anyone ever tell you how hot you sound when you're turned on?" I whispered.

He bit his lip, deep crevices forming between his eyebrows. "D-don't stop."

"Not gonna. No way." Maybe I couldn't get into getting off myself, but I damn sure wasn't letting him down completely.

"Oh…shit…" He shuddered. I gritted my teeth and stroked him as fast as I could, and then his eyes flew open and he moaned as he came, his semen making my hand slick. I kept going until he whispered "S-stop…please…"

I stopped and loosened my grasp.

Nate exhaled, dropping onto the pillow. "God, I love your hands."

I laughed and kissed the tip of his nose.

"Just for that," he slurred, "dinner's on me."

"Hey, I'm not gonna say no to free food."

Nate chuckled. He kissed me softly, then looked down. "We could probably use some tissues."

"Yeah, we could. Stay there."

"Will do." He closed his eyes and smiled.

I got up and went into the bathroom. As I wiped off my hand, I caught my reflection in the mirror.

You're not fooling anyone. You're still dragging.

Yeah, I was. I still felt like shit. I still felt like a fucking failure for not being able to have sex with him like I'd flown out here to do.

But at least he'd gotten off.

And maybe by my next trip to see him, I'd have my head screwed back on.

Maybe.

Chapter Thirteen

Nate

When I boarded the tour bus, Jill was curled up on the couch. She looked up from her iPad, and her pierced eyebrows rose.

"You look like you had a rough night."

I shrugged off my jacket. "Wasn't the best, no."

She set the tablet aside. "What happened?"

"Not much. Which is kind of the problem." I sank onto the couch beside her. She leaned against me, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back. "Theo's a fucking mess."

"Can you blame him?"

"No. But I mean, he's really not handling it well. I've seen him depressed before, but not like that." I rubbed my forehead. "He's…he's just not himself. Not even close."

She sat up and faced me. "Separations will do that to people."

Shaking my head, I leaned forward and kneaded my temples. Why did I feel hung over? I hadn't even had a drink. "It's more than that. I mean, I'm scared to death for him right now."

"You think he'd hurt himself?"

I shuddered. "I hope not. But…I don't know. I've never seen him this low before. And Cam isn't much better."

She frowned. "Sounds like they're both taking this pretty hard."

"They are. And I just…I mean…" I exhaled. "They obviously love each other. But it's like they're not doing a damn thing to get back together. And I want to help, but…" I cleared my throat. "But I'm all the way out here, hearing bits and pieces and watching them through Skype and—"

"Maybe you need to be there."

"Probably. But Skype's the best I can do right now. Well, and seeing them one at a time."

"Seeing them both at the same time might be better. For them and for you."

"I doubt they'd fly out together."

"That's why I said maybe *you* need to be *there*."

I met her eyes. "We have shows stacked up for months."

"I know." She gripped my hand tightly. "But they can be rescheduled."

I blinked. "Jill—"

"Honey, a few rescheduled or canceled shows will piss off the powers that be, but it happens. It won't do any damage in the long

run. And it could be worth it if you can help Theo and Cam work things out."

Letting out a long breath, I stared at the gray carpet at our feet.

She let go of my hand and squeezed my shoulder. "You have got to take care of yourself. You learned that the hard way on the last tour."

I shuddered at the memory. I'd never been so sick for so long in all my life.

"They're important to you," she went on. "You're part of their marriage. So going to them and helping them fix it? That counts as taking care of you. Especially because we both know you'll be in bad shape if they split up for good."

My stomach lurched. I couldn't argue with her.

"Okay." I nodded and scrubbed a hand over my face. "I'll talk to Andy tonight." Oh, our manager would be *thrilled*.

"Good." She patted my shoulder and offered a faint smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

I played three more shows, and as soon as the third was over, I took off for the airport. With any luck, this trip would be short. The fewer canceled shows, the better. If I could pull this off in a week, I'd only miss three shows. Not a lot of time, but God, I hoped it was enough.

I'd tried to book a first-class ticket—might as well fly comfortably if I could—but nothing was available, so I wedged myself into a window seat in coach. The flight was packed too. Good thing I had noise-canceling headphones.

After takeoff, as some old school Metallica drowned out the noise, I pulled a small plastic case out of my laptop bag and opened it. Inside was a fountain pen. Blue lacquer, chrome, some cool antique designs engraved in the nib—it was gorgeous.

I rarely wrote with it. I much preferred cheap gel pens, which I bought by the dozen and blew through like crazy.

But this pen went everywhere with me.

Holding my breath, I ran my thumb along the silver lettering etched into the body.

Pizza + horror isn't the same without you. Happy V. Day. Love, Cam & Theo.

The guys would probably think it was ridiculously sentimental to carry it around with me, especially since I didn't really use it, but I'd never been able to bring myself to unpack it. Whenever I was out on

the road, it was with me.

I'd been out on tour when they gave it to me. It was a couple of weeks before our third Valentine's Day, and they'd come to visit me. Buffalo, New York. For some reason I always remembered it was Buffalo, New York.

In their hotel room, as we all lay cuddled up beneath the sheets, they'd given me a gift-wrapped box and told me not to open it until the fourteenth. When the fourteenth came, I couldn't wait until our set was over and I could finally get back to my bunk on the tour bus and open the gift. And when I did, still sweaty and full of adrenaline from the show, I'd found this blue-and-chrome pen.

I never told them, but those etched words almost brought me to tears that night. The loneliness of the road had been getting to me, and I missed them even more with the reminder of our annual tradition, but it did me a lot of good to know they missed me too. And that our silly tradition had become something they missed as much as I did.

No matter what, I promised to myself that night, I'd be home for Valentine's Day the next year. And I was.

I smiled to myself, tracing the words with my thumb again. Our first Valentine's Day as a trio had been a beautiful disaster if ever there was one. I'd been a little edgy about it because I'd only been seeing them for a few months at that point. We'd clearly progressed beyond a booty-call situation, and we were very openly in love with one another.

We'd spent Christmas together. Just a quiet couple of days at home, exchanging a few gifts and watching movies.

But Valentine's Day was tricky territory. And I supposed it would set the stage for their wedding anniversary. Was I a part of it? Or did I quietly bow out that night and let them have it to themselves?

Sometime in January, while Theo was figuring out what to cook for dinner and Cam and I were hanging out in the kitchen, Cam had casually looked at me and said, "I'm making dinner reservations for Valentine's Day. What time do you think I should give them?"

I blinked. "You're…*me*?"

"Um. Yeah?" He cocked his head. "It's a Wednesday, so you'll be at the studio that day, right? I want to make sure you have time to get there."

"So…" I glanced at Theo, then back at Cam. "We're all going?"

"Well, yeah." Theo wiped off his hands. Then he wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed the side of my neck. "Of course we are."

Cam studied me. "Did you really think…"

Heat rushed into my cheeks. "I don't know. I'm sorry. I guess…"

"What?" Theo turned me around, and he smiled as he caressed my

cheek. “Why in the world would we leave you out on Valentine’s Day?”

“Because…” Holding his gaze, though, I couldn’t form the words. *Because you guys probably have some tradition that goes back a decade? Because I’m not* really *part of this?*

“Nate…” Theo drew me in, and the instant he kissed me, all my doubts went up in smoke.

Every time I started second-guessing my place in this group, they effortlessly reminded me that we were playing for keeps. They didn’t even have to say a word. Just kiss me like this—tenderly, holding me to him like he really didn’t want to let me go—and it all made sense.

Theo touched his forehead to mine. He was breathing hard. So was I. “Any questions?” he whispered.

“No.” I swept my tongue across my lips and turned to Cam. “S-seven is good. For the reservation.”

So Cam made the reservation for three, and as soon as he was off the phone, the two of them took me upstairs. They spent the rest of the evening making damn sure I didn’t forget I was part of this relationship. I could barely move the next morning. They weren’t in much better shape.

And as much as I’d never been the most romantic guy in the world, I had to admit I was looking forward to Valentine’s Day. I’d never actually spent it with anyone. I even had to get advice from Jill about gifts and stuff because I had no clue and even less money. In the end, I’d settled on gift cards—a bookstore for Cam and a *Star Wars* website for Theo—and, like a dork, counted down the days.

Valentine’s Day came, but we didn’t make it to dinner.

Three days earlier, Theo had started coughing. The next morning, he had a wicked fever. By that evening, Cam was coughing and burning up too.

Stupid me, in between running to Walgreens for various drugs —“*For the last time, no, I am* not *cooking meth!*”—I made the mistake of smugly proclaiming that the microbe had missed me.

“Yeah,” Theo croaked. “Give it time.”

Sure enough—on the morning of the fourteenth, when I was supposed to be heading into the studio to record a new demo with the band, I woke up feeling like I’d been hit by a truck. By noon, I was as sick as they were.

So there we were—our first Valentine’s Day together, and all three of us were sick as dogs. Cam canceled our dinner reservation. As we huddled on the couch with blankets and a Costco-size pack of cough drops, Theo muttered, “Knew I should’ve gotten a flu shot.”

“Yeah.” Cam coughed a few times. “Then you wouldn’t have gotten us sick.”

“Hey! You could’ve gotten it from anywhere.”

“Uh-huh.” Cam sniffled. “Because you came down with it right before I did. Totally your fault.”

“And I got it from one of you,” I grumbled. “So you’re both bastards.”

We’d exchanged playful glares, then laughed. And coughed. Of course.

“What do you guys want to do for dinner?” I asked. “Because I’m pretty sure we’re not wanted in public right now.”

Theo grunted softly and nodded. “Well, if I see another bowl of soup, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“Ugh.” Cam wrinkled his nose. “Me too.”

We all thought for a moment. Or at least didn’t say anything. They might’ve been spacing out. We’d all taken enough decongestants and crap, it was a wonder any of us could still stand up.

I sipped the horrendous anti-flu tea brew Theo’s mother had insisted on, and paused to gag over the horrible taste. Couldn’t we have something that tasted good? Tea, cough drops, and chicken soup only did so much for the palate.

“What about pizza?” Theo rasped. “Then we can have them load it up with spicy shit, and someone can bring it to us.”

“That…” Cam blinked a few times. “Is genius.” He picked up his phone off the coffee table. “I’ll order it if you guys want to figure out something to watch.”

“On it.” Theo grabbed the remote.

At some point—the details were a little fuzzy now—we’d decided on a horror movie marathon. I remembered that one of us had vetoed watching any kind of comedy while we were all coughing like that, and somehow, we’d segued from there into agreeing on horror. Not bad horror or stupid horror either. Maybe it was the flu bug, maybe it was all the drugs we were taking, but we were all in the mood for twisted, fucked-up, everyone’s-having-nightmares-for-a-while horror.

It was awesome. The pizza was the best thing I’d eaten in days. The movies were amazing. Eventually, we’d found our way up to the California-king bed, collapsed in a heap, and slept until almost noon the next day.

The following January, when it came time to talk about reservations and what we wanted to do, I’d said, “Well…we could always do what we did last year.”

Theo raised an eyebrow. “With or without the flu?”

“Without. Obviously.” I smiled. “But hanging out on the couch watching horror movies and ordering pizza…”

“I love that idea,” Cam said.

Grinning, Theo nodded. “Me too.”

We decided that night that this would be our Valentine's Day tradition. Horror movies and pizza. It was about the least romantic thing in the world, but it was ours, and I loved it.

In the present, wedged into an airplane seat on my way to Los Angeles, I shook myself. I slid the pen back into my laptop case and tucked it under the seat in front of me.

Staring out the window, I hoped like hell there was another Valentine's Day full of horror movies in our future. I hadn't even realized till now how much those nights meant to me.

Please don't let last time be the last time…

* * * * *

At LAX, there were some paparazzi lurking near the exit, but they didn't notice me. Either I was doing a damn good job at going incognito today—I'd even dyed my hair back to my natural light brown—or they were waiting for someone with a bigger name than mine. I felt for the A-listers. Nothing capped off a long day of air travel like getting mobbed by a bunch of assholes with cameras and no sense of personal space.

I slipped past them, and released a breath. *Thank God.*

Now to get some wheels. I'd sold my car before we'd gone on tour. There was no point in paying insurance while I was away, and that piece of shit had been on its last legs anyway. Might as well get rid of it.

I rented the most bland, unassuming vehicle I could get my hands on. Urban camouflage. Anything to blend into the scenery.

Then I headed for my hotel. Though I lived at the house, Theo had moved out. If I stayed there while I was in town, it would get…weird.

So, when I'd bought my plane ticket, I'd also booked a hotel. Not a terribly expensive one, though nice enough it would've satisfied Cam's high-class tastes, and it was close to Sherman Oaks, so not too far from the house. Maybe someday I'd be able to stay at the Ritz without blinking, but not today.

I checked into my hotel and, after a quick shower, sat on the edge of the bed, cradling my phone in both hands. Who to call first?

Well, after I texted Jill to let her know I'd made it.

And Andy to apologize again for fucking up the tour.

And—

Stop stalling.

What was I doing? I hadn't flown out here to handle this shit over the phone.

Without another thought, I grabbed my wallet and keys and hurried down to the rental car. Cam would be home by now unless his

schedule had changed drastically in the last few months. And he and Theo had always insisted that it was my house too, that I didn't need to call before showing up. Okay, so that might not have applied to times like this when they thought I was out on the road, but still.

I got into the rental car. Heart pounding, I started the engine.

And hoping like hell that I hadn't come out here for nothing, I drove toward the house.

Chapter Fourteen

Cam

I scrubbed the kitchen sink, then gave the kitchen a once-over to make sure it was spotless. Not that there was much of a mess to begin with. All I'd done was make a sandwich and a pitcher of iced tea.

I'd missed a couple of crumbs, though, so I ran the sponge over the whole island again just in case I'd missed any others. And the rest of the counter too. Just in case.

That's everything, right?

Bread was back where it belonged *with* its plastic tie instead of the bag just twisted and tucked underneath. Butter knife, cutting board, and plate were clean, dry, and back in their respective drawers. Cheese and lunch meat had been put away before I'd eaten since they couldn't be left out, but just in case, I checked. Right. They were—

The doorbell stopped me in my tracks.

What the hell?

I glanced around the kitchen. Shit. I'd forgotten what I was doing. What I still needed to do. Was there anything? No, I was pretty sure that was everything. Pretty sure. Almost—

Go get the door, idiot.

I walked out of the kitchen and down the hall, hoping whoever this was, they made it fucking quick so I could get back to making sure my house was in order. I'd be annoyed as fuck if I woke up in the middle of the night, remembering some minor task that I'd left undone, and had to get up and take care of it before I could go back to sleep. That had happened a few times recently, and I was kind of over it.

I looked through the peephole, and all thoughts of the kitchen vanished. My jaw dropped.

I quickly turned the dead bolt and pulled open the door. "Nate? What the hell are you doing here?"

He smiled, though it was halfhearted. "Hey." He paused. "Can, um, can I come in?"

"Oh. Right. Of course." I stood aside, and after he'd stepped in, closed the door behind us. "When did you get back in town?"

"Today." He slid his hands into his pockets. "I had to come out here. To be with you." Nate hesitated. "And Theo."

"But…the tour? Shouldn't—"

"We're canceling a few dates."

My throat tightened. Canceled shows were costly as hell. If he hadn't already had an earful for this, it was probably coming. "Nate, I

can't ask you—"

"You're not." His tone was still soft, but there was an edge to it now. As if he were subtly putting his foot down. "I can't just be out there on the road while you guys are going through this. I thought if I was here, maybe I…" He dropped his gaze and his voice. "Maybe I could help."

Guilt and far too many other emotions balled up in the pit of my stomach. "Does Theo know you're in town?"

Nate kept his gaze down, and his cheeks darkened as he shook his head. "Not yet. I…guess I wanted to start with one at a time."

I didn't ask how he'd decided who to see first. I'd chalk it up as a coin toss and leave it at that.

"Well." I cautiously stepped toward him. "The circumstances blow, but it's still good to see you."

At that, he met my gaze, and a slight smile curved his gorgeous lips. "It's always good to see you. Even if the circumstances are crap."

"Agreed." I pulled him into my arms and kissed him.

God. Yeah, the circumstances were crap, but I had never—*never*—been so relieved to feel Nate's soft lips against mine. As his arms snaked around me, and I pulled him closer, nudging his lips apart with mine, all I could think was…*you're here*.

Nate broke the kiss. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" He licked his lips. "You didn't have plans or—"

"Nothing I can't cancel." I kissed him again, started to pull away, and then went back for more. He'd probably come here to talk, and there was a ton to talk about, but God, I couldn't keep my hands off him. Up until a few minutes ago, I'd expected to spend the evening alone, but now he was here, and I needed to touch him and taste him. I wanted him naked. I wanted him under me. Or on top. In my head, we were already fucking, and it didn't even matter who was inside who as long as we were moving together, sweating together, losing our minds together…

Nate abruptly broke the kiss again. "Want—" He swallowed. "Want to go upstairs?"

Damn it. The bed and the lube were suddenly much too far away. I couldn't stop long enough to go all the way upstairs.

"We will." I pushed him against the door. "In a minute."

He started to speak, but I slid my hand over the front of his jeans, and he just moaned instead. I kissed him, and he returned it as I rubbed his cock through his clothes.

"I've missed you so much," I panted between kisses.

"M-me too. I've…oh, God…"

I unzipped his pants, and he fumbled with his belt buckle. Between us, somehow, we freed his thick and fully hard cock, and I

couldn't wait a second longer.

Nate swore as I went to my knees in front of him. Again as I took his cock as far into my mouth as I could. His fingertips twitched on the back of my head. He murmured curses, and I did everything I could to keep him swearing and gasping. I stroked with one hand and kept his hips still with the other, and with my mouth, I teased the head of his cock until his knees trembled. I could've done this all night long, but I doubted I'd last long even without one of us touching my dick. It had been too long. I was too turned on by his mere presence. And if the way he moaned and trembled was any indication, he wasn't going to last either.

"Fuck…" He stroked my hair as he rocked his hips, sliding his cock in and out of my mouth. "You're gonna…make me—" He grunted and shuddered, and I swallowed every drop as he fucked my mouth all the way through his orgasm. Then he relaxed, slumping against the wall, and I sat back on my heels.

"Good to see you," I said, wiping my lip with the back of my hand.

He laughed softly, drunkenly. He tucked himself back in and zipped up his jeans. Then, with a shaky hand, he gestured for me to get up.

As soon as I was on my feet, he shouldered himself off the wall, turned me around, and pushed me up against where I'd pinned him. He kissed me hard, deep, like he needed to taste himself on me and drive me insane all at the same time.

With fumbling hands, he unzipped my pants, and as his fingers closed around my cock, I broke the kiss with a gasp.

"Oh fuck, yes." I swept my tongue across my lips. "Love how you…oh God…"

"Good." Nate gripped the back of my neck as tightly as he gripped my cock, and he kissed up and down my throat as he stroked harder and harder.

Eyes closed, I held on to his shoulders and let my head fall back against the wall. His teeth grazed my neck. Then he nipped my earlobe, and I distantly heard myself cursing.

"Come for me," he whispered. "I know you're close."

I've been close since you walked in the door.

"Fuck…" I gripped his shoulders tighter, and my knees almost wobbled out from under me as he jerked me faster and faster, and then I gasped, and cried out something I didn't understand, and suddenly the only thing keeping me upright was Nate's body pressing me against the wall.

"Stay there." He kissed me lightly. "I'll be right back."

I nodded. Leaning against the wall, I managed to stay up and fix

my clothes while Nate stepped into the downstairs bathroom. He cleaned off his hand and arm, then came back to where I waited on shaking legs in the hallway.

Holding my gaze, he draped his arms around my neck. “I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you like crazy.” I pulled him into a long, lazy kiss. “Maybe we should go somewhere more comfortable?”

“Good idea.”

Despite our shaking legs, we made it upstairs, stripped out of our clothes, and climbed into bed together.

I smoothed his short brown hair. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

Nate grinned. “Give me a few minutes, and I’ll make sure you *know* I’m here.”

I shivered. Knowing him, he wasn’t kidding.

He cuddled closer, resting his arm across my waist. “Can’t believe how long it’s been since I’ve been home. Only a few months, but… kinda feels like forever.”

“I know.” I studied him. “You rang the doorbell when you showed up.”

“Yeah?”

“But…this is your house too. You could’ve let yourself in.”

“You weren’t expecting me.” He ran his hand up the middle of my chest. “I didn’t want to freak you out.”

“Fair enough.” I bit down on a comment that I would’ve assumed he was Theo. “So, you’re here now.”

Nate held my gaze. “Yeah. It just seems like…” He exhaled hard. “Look, I know this is between you and Theo, but it kind of involves me too.”

“Of course it does.”

“So being out there on the road while you guys were sorting this out didn’t seem right. Seemed like I should be here. With you guys. Maybe there’s nothing I can do to help, but there’s even less I can do when I’m three thousand miles away.”

I brushed a few strands of hair off his forehead. “I just don’t want to pull you into the middle of it any more than we already have.”

“I’m in the middle of it whether any of us like it or not.” His forehead creased and his eyebrows pulled together. “I just want you guys to be okay.”

There is nothing in the world I want more.

“Well,” I said. “I’m not sure what can be done. We’ve been talking, but it’s kind of like negotiating a nuclear arms deal—very, very slow and careful.”

“But are you getting anywhere?”

I avoided his eyes. “We’re…”

Nate sighed, combing his fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t bring this up in bed.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, it’s not going well, but you’re here tonight.” I caressed his cheek. “Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

Nate nodded. A grin slowly came to life on his lips, and he pulled me closer. As he pressed his hardening cock against my thigh, he said, “Everything else can wait. But I can’t.”

“Then don’t.”

Chapter Fifteen

Theo

Days like this were the worst, and lately, they'd been happening more and more often.

Sitting in front of my computer, my drawing pad on my lap, I stared at the guest room wall and couldn't conjure up a damn thing to draw. I'd been sitting here for two and a half hours and had nothing but a blank screen to show for it.

I'd been awake since four this morning. Around five, I'd given up on going back to sleep, and decided to get out of bed. Around five thirty, I'd finally succeeded in getting upright.

All morning, I'd felt like I was dragging myself through wet cement. The simplest tasks—getting up, making my coffee, logging into my laptop—took twice as much time and left my brain feeling dried up and done.

I put the drawing pad aside and rubbed my face with both hands. The worst part was that this wasn't surprising. Not being able to sleep. Not being able to draw. That was my life lately, and it scared the hell out of me. What the hell was wrong with me? Why couldn't I function?

Some days were better than others. There were times when working on an art piece would help me shake off the wet cement and snap out of it.

Today was not one of those days. In fact, I hadn't had one of those days in a while now. And when I woke up like this, it was like waking up with a bad stiff neck—it was going to be with me until I slept it off tonight.

Except a bad stiff neck could be at least eased by someone with skilled hands. Assuming that someone wasn't annoyed with me about something, or wasn't trying to get himself ready to go to work…

I sighed into the silence. Well, he wasn't here, and I needed to get myself ready to go to work. I rubbed my eyes. All I had to do was grab a shower, shave, get dressed, and make it out to the car. Once I got up and got moving, it would be easy. Easier. Less daunting than I was making it out to be in my head. Why was this so hard?

It took a good minute or two of psyching myself up, but I dragged my ass out of bed and across the hall to the bathroom. I turned on the hot water, and while I waited for it to warm up, stripped out of my boxers.

As soon as I stepped into the bathtub, the rush of hot water woke me up. It didn't quite pull me out of this funk, but it was an

improvement. Shaving would be another step in the right direction. And coffee. There would be coffee. I still had time to swing into Starbucks on the way to work as long as I got my act together. Which I would. Because coffee.

Eyes closed, I let out a long breath. I would be okay. I would get through this. Whenever these stupid funks happened, I made it out the other side, even if it took a few miserable hours or days to get there. This would be no different.

I turned around, putting my back to the spray, and tilted my head forward so the hot jets would massage my neck and shoulders. Another small improvement.

I wanted to believe this was just part of dealing with my separation, but the funks had started before that. Well before that. They were worse now, of course, but even before Nate had joined us, I remembered days where I wanted to stay in bed until it was time to go to sleep again.

"Come on, Theo!" Cam would scoff as he tied his tie. "Jesus Christ. We have to be on the road in *ten minutes*."

I'd groan and drag myself out of bed. A quick shower, a quicker shave, and fifteen minutes later, we were on the road. Sometimes he'd let it go. Other times he'd make sure I knew how much it irritated him.

"I hate being late," he'd mutter as he flew down a back road. "You know that."

"I do," I'd grumble from the passenger seat. "And I also know we're going to be fifteen minutes early, just like always."

"But I want extra time in case there's traffic." He'd fly around another car, cursing under his breath. "What if there's a wreck or something?"

"Keep driving like this, and there *will* be."

That would earn me a glare and some cold silence, but he'd rein in the road rage, so…win.

In the present, I shook myself. Then I got out of the shower and dried off. I still had time to get on the road, but I was also still dragging—my limbs moving like my blood had been replaced with cement—so I didn't want to fuck around. I was not in the mood for my boss to give me crap for being late.

By some miracle, I made it to Starbucks, then walked into the office right on time. On a day like today, that was a win. And that win was enough to get me through my e-mails, which in turn was enough to get me through a morning staff meeting. By noon, I was on a roll, putting one foot in front of the other, finishing one task after another, and though I was still dragging, was almost convinced I could keep this up until six.

While I was updating a spreadsheet for a colleague, my phone buzzed.

For fuck's sake. Now what?

I grabbed it off the desk.

Nate's name made me smile. His message, however, made my heart stop.

I'm in town—can we meet up?

In town? What the hell? He had a show in…hell, I couldn't remember what city, but it wasn't Los Angeles. Unless they'd flown him in for a talk show or something, and would have him flying back out to meet the band.

You're in town?

A moment later: *Yeah. Are you free?*

For you, I thought, *I'd walk out of a meeting with the CEO.*

I wrote back, *I'm staying at my brother's house. Meet me there?*

Can do. When?

I'm home by seven.

I texted him the address.

By all rights, that should've dragged me out of my funk and left me giddy for the rest of the day. But it didn't. The thought of seeing Nate thrilled me, but I didn't *feel* that thrill. And realizing how little I felt made me feel even lower.

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. This vicious cycle could seriously go fuck itself. Especially since it had happened before, long before I'd had a possible divorce hanging over my head.

There was one episode that still made my teeth grind just thinking about it. After Nate's last tour, we'd taken a trip to Lake Tahoe for some snowboarding and a little time away from Los Angeles. Cam and I had hesitated—Nate had been out on the road for ages, so we thought he'd want to stay home for a little while, but he'd insisted. Especially since he'd been itching to hit the slopes for a while now.

So we'd gone, and the whole fucking time, it was like my brain had a thick wet blanket over it. Everything took ten times the effort. Just picking out a meal at the resort's restaurant—finding anything I could actually see myself eating—had been a monstrous task.

I figured I was just tired from the drive. After all, the roads were a bit treacherous as we'd gotten up into the higher elevations, so I was a bit drained. A nice dinner, a glass of wine, and a good night's sleep, and I'd be back to normal. In theory, anyway.

Naturally, we'd all wanted to put our chalet's bed to good use, and of course, it was one of those rare times when my heart wasn't in it. I didn't let it show, though. I kissed them, touched them, turned them both on like they were turning me on. I sucked Cam's dick. I fucked Nate until he almost cried.

Between the sex, the fatigue, and the wine, I fell asleep with a smile on my face despite the way I'd felt all day.

Two in the morning rolled around, and I was wide awake. They were both sleeping peacefully beside me—Nate with his face buried in the pillows, Cam on his back, snoring softly.

And that dark cloud? Present and accounted for.

There was no going back to sleep, so I got up, silently put on a T-shirt and boxers, and left the bedroom. Though I hadn't brought my electronic drawing pad, I had brought a sketchpad, so I pulled that out of my suitcase along with a pencil pouch, made a cup of coffee, and sat by the bay window overlooking the lake.

In the warmth from the wood-burning stove, I drew. I didn't let myself think about anything else. And at least sketching what I saw meant not having to pull a new image from my foggy brain. All I had to do was focus on light and shadow, values and lines.

The first page was the interior of the room where I was sitting—the rustic vaulted ceilings and the black wood-burning stove. A framed mirror. A couple of lamps and a gigantic sofa. As the sun came up and the lake and snow-covered trees were visible again, I turned the page and started on the scenery outside. Slowly, my view took shape on the page, with messy rough sketches turning into trees, water, snow, and the railing just outside the window. It wasn't the greatest landscape I'd ever done, but those lines and smudges kept me sane when my brain was trying its level best to be anything but.

A few hours later, as I poured myself another cup of coffee, the bedroom door opened. A moment later, Cam appeared, wearing a pair of blue sweats.

"You're up," he said, his voice still sleepy.

I'd forced a laugh. "Thank you, Captain Obvious."

He chuckled, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "Couldn't sleep?"

My humor faded. I focused on stirring some sugar into my coffee. "No. I've been up for a while."

"I know." He wrapped his arms around me and kissed the side of my neck. "Everything okay?"

Why do I want to say no? Everything is fine, but it doesn't feel *fine.*

I nodded, resting my hands on top of his. "I'm good. Felt a little off since yesterday, so…I might be coming down with something. I don't know."

"No, not on vacation!" He held me tighter. "Talk about fucked-up timing."

"I know, right?" I turned around in his arms and laced my fingers together behind his neck. "I'm going to have to bow out today, but I want you guys to go have a good time. That's what we came out here

to do."

Cam frowned, caressing my face. "But what about you?"

"I'll be fine." *Right?* "Tomorrow, I'll join you guys on the slopes."

When they came back that night, I was secretly thankful they were too tired and sore to even think about sex. Nate was teasing Cam about being an old man, but he was rubbing his back and joints just as gingerly as Cam was. They'd had a great time, though, and I was perfectly happy to listen to their stories as we sat down in the living room with some takeout they'd picked up.

We spent that evening curled up in front of the big screen TV, watching movies when we weren't tossing popcorn at each other. By the end of the night, that wet blanket was still in place on my brain, but I did feel better. Not great, but…better.

It was days later—long after we'd returned to LA and our daily grind—before I felt like myself again. I'd still had a good time, and even made it out onto the slopes the third and fourth days. The whole trip was a memory I still treasured.

But that dark, heavy feeling had been the invisible fourth person along for the ride, and remembering the trip was difficult without also remembering that. What should have been a few relaxing days with the two men I loved had been a miserable fight to *pretend* I was having a few relaxing days with the two men I loved.

Shaking my head, I tapped my thumbs on the wheel. A concerned coworker had suggested a therapist. Taylor had brought it up more than once. They meant well, but this wasn't something a therapist could touch. Not when it was something this physical. It didn't just affect my mind.

I probably just needed more sleep or something. No idea.

By the time I got to my brother's house, I was no better than I'd been this morning. And Nate would be here soon. Fuck.

I went inside and into the guest room, then across the hall to the bathroom. There I leaned on the counter, and stared down my reflection. I'd already fucked up one night with Nate. Under no circumstances was that going to happen again tonight.

He wanted to see me, not that pathetic lump that I'd been all day, or that I'd been that night in the hotel room. I cringed at that memory. It was not happening twice, damn it.

Come on, Theo. Snap out of it. Just fucking snap out of it.

Preferably before *Nate gets here.*

Chapter Sixteen

Nate

I was kind of uneasy about going to Theo's brother's place. The guy had never been my favorite person in the world, and I was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. He was nice enough most of the time, but a couple of beers could lift the veil on some homophobia that he usually kept to himself. It was no wonder he and Theo hadn't gotten along well since they were teenagers. How in the world were they living together?

On the other hand, Zach's wife, Taylor, was almost enough to negate his jackassery. She was one of the sweetest women I knew, and just like Cam and Theo did, I adored her. Now if her husband would go kick rocks, we'd all be happy.

But he was taking Theo in during the trial separation, so maybe I was the one being a dick.

I pulled into Zach's driveway and parked between his truck and Theo's car. Heart thumping and stomach turning, I walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

When it opened, Taylor smiled. "Nate! It's wonderful to see you. Come on in." She waved me in, and I slid my hands into my pockets as I stepped inside.

"Hi," I said. "Long time no see."

"It has been. How's the tour going?"

Kind of in limbo right now, if I'm honest.

"It's going good. Good." I gnawed my lip. "Is, uh, Theo—"

"Hey, sorry." His voice spun me around, and my heart sped up. Theo smiled as he came into the small foyer. "Guess she beat me to the door."

"It's okay." I glanced at Taylor. "I could think of worse people to run into."

She laughed. "Smartass." Then she headed back into the living room, leaving us by ourselves.

With no one else to distract us, Theo and I faced each other. God. Just the sight of him was almost enough to overwhelm me. I loved touring, but being so far away from him and Cam…

Theo released a breath and stepped closer. "I…can't believe you're here."

"I am." I smiled. "You're not hallucinating, I promise."

He laughed, then gathered me in his arms and hugged me close. I knew that was all we could do out in the open with Zach and Taylor around, and in that moment, I didn't mind. I just wanted to hold him

and be close to him.

"I can't believe you're here," he whispered.

"I had to be." I held him tighter. "Being out there while you guys are—"

"What?" He jerked back and met my gaze, eyes wide. "Is that why you're in town?"

I nodded.

"Nate." He cupped my cheek and started to say something but glanced toward the living room. "You know what, let's go back in the guest room. It's a bit more private."

"Okay."

He led me down the hall to the room at far end, and gestured for me to go in.

The room was small. A Realtor had been playing fast and loose with the term "bedroom," but it was a room with a bed in it, so I supposed it qualified. There wasn't space for much else. A tiny closet. A dresser which had Theo's laptop and drawing pad on it.

The door clicked shut, and I turned around.

"I'm glad to see you," he said softly. "Don't ever doubt that. But… you're putting your career on the line. This is what you've been dreaming about since you were a kid. You can't—"

"I can't be a million miles away while you guys are falling apart like this."

Theo lowered his gaze.

I moved closer and put my hands on his waist. "I love you guys. I had to come out here and see if there's *something* I can do to help."

His lips tightened.

"I want you and Cam to be okay." I swallowed. "Together or separate."

"We both want that too. But I don't want you to lose everything you've worked for."

"And I don't want to lose what we all have together."

Theo flinched. "Do you think I do?"

"Of course not." I wrapped my arms around him. "That's why I'm here. I know you guys want to save what you have. Maybe there's something we can all do to help."

"I don't know." He met my gaze, and slowly, a smile came to life. Caressing my cheek, he said, "I have you tonight, though. Right now, that's all I could possibly ask for."

Cam had said almost the same thing. I didn't know how to feel about that. I didn't know what to say.

Theo, however, knew what to do—he pulled me closer and pressed his lips to mine. My knees shook. Just like with Cam, my intentions to come over here and talk melted in the warmth of a kiss.

Not that I was really surprised. It was impossible to resist either of them, and even before I got here, I'd been almost positive I wouldn't leave this place tonight without being fucked.

Maybe we needed this. Maybe we needed to put aside the talking and thinking, and just be physical for a little while. Just…be. Reaffirm the bond I had with each of them, then try to coax them into finding the bond between them. It was still there. It had to be.

Theo broke the kiss, breathing hard against my lips. "I don't think this is why you're here."

"No." I pressed the small of his back, pulling his hips against me so we could both feel each other's obvious erections. "But I think we both want it."

"I won't argue with that," he growled and kissed me again. "We'll have to be quiet, though."

I grinned into his kiss. "Challenge accepted."

Theo laughed softly, then dipped his head and kissed my neck, and that challenge got a lot tougher. I dug my teeth into my lip and held on to him, concentrating on not making a sound, which wasn't easy when Theo was turning me on like this.

"You have lube?" I asked.

"Mmhmm."

"Then maybe we should take off these clothes."

"I do love the way you think." In a heartbeat, he had my shirt up and off, and then he peeled off his own. We both muffled our belt buckles, and once they were safely on the floor, we stripped everything else off in a hurry.

Then we climbed into bed and wrapped our arms around each other. The bed was narrow, but we didn't need much space when we were holding each other this close.

Funny—I'd come over here to discuss the tenuous grasp he and Cam had on their marriage, but now that I was naked in bed with him, I was unbearably horny. Especially since he seemed to be in a better state of mind than when I'd seen him last. He kissed me enthusiastically, dug his fingers and even his nails into my flesh, and he gasped and shuddered and moaned as we made out and touched. Whatever had happened the other night, it wasn't happening now, and I couldn't get enough of this version of Theo.

"Fuck me," I breathed.

"God, yes," he growled. "Turn over."

My mouth watered as we carefully and silently changed position. Theo pulled a bottle of lube out of a duffel bag by the bed and put some on both of us.

Then he knelt behind me, and I had to grip the edge of the mattress just to keep from losing my goddamned mind.

Theo leaned over me as he pressed the head of his cock against me.

"Not a sound," he whispered, and sank his teeth into my shoulder.

I clapped my own hand over my mouth, squeezing my eyes shut as I fought to stay silent. My eyes watered as he pushed into me. I had to literally bite my tongue to stifle a moan and tried to breathe as soundlessly as possible as he worked himself deeper.

When he was moving easily in and out, he picked up speed, but not much. As it was, the bed creaked ever so quietly, the faintest little warning squeaks to let us know we were playing with fire. Thrusting any harder would alert anyone in the house that we were fucking, and Theo toed that line as if he knew exactly how much this bed could take without giving us away.

And it was amazing. Deliciously slow and languid, every motion taking ages to complete, making sure I felt every inch of him and every breath he took. Sex with him was usually rough and fast and hard, but the need for silence slowed us down. And maybe it was more than that. Maybe we both just needed to hold on, and be as close to each other as humanly possible without caring if orgasms happened.

They would, of course. With Theo's cock sliding in and out of me, his hot skin touching mine, his lips against that stinging bite mark on my shoulder, his breath on my neck—an orgasm was inevitable.

Theo groaned against my neck. I shivered, biting my lip. Yeah, definitely inevitable.

Holding myself up on one arm, I reached down and started pumping my cock in time with Theo's slow, smooth strokes.

"You gonna come?" he breathed.

"Uh-huh."

He growled something I didn't understand. Didn't matter. I let my head fall forward, and had just enough presence of mind not to rock back against him and not to moan like I felt like moaning. He had me so close, riding that razor-thin line between "almost there" and "long gone," and every stroke pushed me a little closer to crossing it.

Theo shuddered, and I was over that line. I came so hard my arm almost buckled beneath me, and right then, he buried his face against my neck, barely muffling his throaty groan as his dick pulsed inside me. His hips jerked, as if he needed to get just a *little* deeper. The bed creaked, but not enough to give us away.

And just like that, we were still.

"Holy fuck," he breathed. "I needed that."

"Me too." Might need it again before tonight's over.

With a soft moan, he pulled out. We cleaned ourselves up, then lay together in that narrow bed, the thin sheets pulled up to our waists

as we kissed lazily.

After a while, we drew back and looked in each other's eyes.

I cupped his cheek. "Seems like you're feeling better. Than when I last saw you, I mean."

He broke eye contact, color rushing into his face. "A little, yeah. Today was kind of rough, but…" Smiling subtly, he met my gaze again. "I do feel better now."

"That's good." I paused, not wanting to kill the mood, but also not forgetting that I wasn't just here for sex and cuddling. "So, what's the plan with Cam?"

Theo exhaled. "Well, we've had a few sit-downs, but they haven't gone anywhere."

"Have you thought about, I don't know, like a counselor?"

Theo shook his head. "Cam's afraid anyone we go to will suggest cutting you loose."

My heart flipped.

He took my hand and kissed my palm. "It's not an option, Nate. Don't worry. That's why we haven't seen anyone yet."

"They don't have to know about me."

"Can't really be open and honest with a counselor if we're not open about this part of it."

Guilt squeezed my chest. Was I standing between them and the help they needed?

"We're working on it," Theo said. "I promise. We are."

"Cam said it's a slow process."

His features tightened, subtly but unmistakably. "Have you seen him? Since you got into town?"

"Um…"

Theo shook himself. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. That wasn't a fair question. You can't really be in two places at once, so of course you're going to see one of us first. I…didn't mean to make it sound like an accusation."

"For what it's worth," I said. "I saw him last night. I thought about trying to bring you both to the same place, but—"

"No, it's okay. And that probably wouldn't have worked, so it's fine. I really…" He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I ran my hand up and down his arm. "How *are* things going? Are you guys getting anywhere?"

Theo's eyes lost focus for a moment. Then he sighed. "I don't even know. We probably just need to bite the bullet and talk things through." He combed his fingers through his disheveled hair. "Figure out where we went wrong."

"You guys have been separated for weeks. You haven't talked about that part yet?"

"We've…" His eyes lost focus. Then he closed them and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We've sat down to talk, but we never get far. Not about things that actually matter."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we meet up. I go into it thinking, okay, this is it—we're gonna hash this out. But we don't. We talk without fighting, which is an improvement, I guess."

I exhaled. It was impossible to imagine those two struggling that hard just to talk without fighting.

Theo turned toward me again. "I'm not really sure what he and I are supposed to do at this point. This is the only serious relationship I've ever had. Him too."

"And me," I whispered.

He nodded, cupping my face gently. "I'm sorry. You're being dragged along with this, and we don't have a clue what we're doing."

I put my hand over his and squeezed it. "That's why I'm here. So maybe the three of us can fix this."

Theo sighed. "I don't know if there's any fixing it, to be honest."

"Why not?"

"It's…" He let out a long breath. "I guess…the thing is, I've only seen Cam a few times since I moved out. And we've kept it cordial most of the time and just talked about superficial shit. But every time we walk away again, it just feels…*more* over."

My throat tightened, and I cleared it to keep my emotions out of my voice. "Like another nail in the coffin?"

"Kinda, yeah. And I'm not sure how to take those nails out, you know?" He looked in my eyes. "About the only thing I'm absolutely sure of right now is that I love him, and I love you."

But do you love him enough?

I couldn't ask, though, so I just leaned in closer and kissed him softly. "I love you too. No matter how this plays out, I'm not going anywhere."

Theo breathed me into another kiss and wrapped his arms around me.

We lay like that for the longest time, cuddling and touching. I barely noticed how small the bed was—we certainly weren't occupying much of it.

We were, however, starting to drift off. And if one of us didn't move, we'd fall asleep like this. Which might make things weird with Zach. And with Cam if he found out.

I lifted myself up on my elbow. "I should probably go."

"It's not that late yet."

"I know." I kissed him softly. "You need to sleep, though, and I… need to check in with the band." With a grimace, I added, "See if the

label has said anything about me being gone." That wasn't entirely true. I'd checked in with the band earlier. Our manager was still pissed that I was gone, and the label execs were gnashing their collective teeth, but Jill and my other bandmates still had my back. But it gave me a convenient excuse to bow out when I doubted either of us wanted to sleep alone.

"Well." Theo laughed dryly. "Good luck with that. Are they, um, upset?"

"A little." *Liar*. "It'll be fine, though. I just needed to be here right now."

His lips pulled tight. "I'd just as soon you didn't put your career on the line, but for what it's worth, I do appreciate you being here."

I managed a smile but didn't say anything.

"Are you in that much of a hurry to leave?" he whispered, sliding his hand down my hip.

"Not as much of a hurry as I was a minute ago."

"Yeah?" His fingertips brushed my cock, and I gasped just before he murmured, "Maybe one more for the road?"

"Mmm, I like the way you think."

* * * * *

I would have loved to stay the night, but not at Zach's place. And Theo had to work tomorrow anyway, so around ten, I kissed him good-bye and left.

I didn't go back to the hotel, though. I drove aimlessly for a little while, trying to figure out where I needed to go and what I needed to do with the rest of the night.

As if that wasn't obvious. What I needed was to see Cam again.

I tried to tell myself it was to make sure he was okay, but that was a lie too.

I knew he wasn't okay. Neither was Theo. Neither was I.

I just…needed him. I felt guilty after spending the evening alone with Theo, and I needed Cam to know I was still here. And after I left Cam's, I'd need to wake up Theo and make sure he was all right.

Cursing out loud, I thumped the wheel with my fist. Being a million miles away from them had been frustrating. Being this close by? Where I could physically see the distance between them? This was torture.

I didn't understand why they were both spinning their tires. The fact that they still loved each other was so painfully obvious even before they'd admitted it out loud. This separation was tearing both of them apart. I just couldn't understand why they weren't doing more—doing *anything*, really—to end the separation.

And it pissed me off. It was like they were each waiting for the other to make a move. They called it moving slowly, called it treading carefully, but from where I stood, it looked more like a game of chicken.

The more I drove, the angrier I was. Gripping the wheel tighter, grinding my teeth until my jaw ached, I fumed at seventy-five miles an hour. What the fuck were they doing to save their marriage? While I'd been twisting in the wind out on the road, worrying myself sick over the two of them, they'd been doing…what, exactly? Sitting in their respective homes, wringing their hands and waiting for the other to make a move? The whole reason they'd separated was so they could take a breather and gather their thoughts. They'd had more than enough time for that.

Now that we were in the same city, I wanted to drag them both into the same room, sit them down, and make them talk it through. They needed to find their way back to the Cam-and-Theo who'd welcomed me into their bed and into their lives, and if I had to referee that discussion, fine. I would.

Except they had to do this. We'd all agreed in the beginning that even though we were a triad, there were things that would need to be sorted out between two individuals. When Cam and I were at each other's throats for a week a couple of years ago, Theo stayed out of it. Otherwise, it was too easy to take sides—or appear to be taking sides—and turn a two-person problem into a three-person problem.

Just coming out here to help them was bending that rule a bit. Okay, a lot. But I couldn't sit back and let them disintegrate.

Kind of seemed like that was exactly what they were doing, though. All they had to do was sit the fuck down and sort out this bullshit. But were they doing that? Were they doing anything? When was the last time they'd even communicated with each other, and had they talked about anything besides the goddamned weather? I could understand treading carefully and trying to just be in the same room without fighting, but for God's sake, maybe they'd fight less if they talked more and fucking *fixed* something.

More and more, I couldn't help but wonder—*were* they actually doing *anything* to save their marriage? Or were they just waiting for someone to call time and take the blame?

I gripped the rental car's wheel tighter.

Fuck this. I hadn't come all the way out here to listen to them letting their marriage die. I came out here to help them fix it. And I didn't have much time before I had to get back to my band. I came here to do something, and I was going to do it.

So I took the next off ramp.

Got back on the freeway going the other direction.

And headed straight for Cam's.

Chapter Seventeen

Cam

Oh God. Oh God. I'm losing it.

I held on to the edge of the bathroom counter with shaking hands.

Maybe…maybe I'm okay.

Deep breath. Another. Slow, slow breathing.

It wasn't over, but I could see the end now. I was coming down. Little by little, breath by breath, my heart started to slow down, and I finally felt like I was getting enough air.

The near-panic had receded enough that I was sure—sort of—that I'd regained control. I didn't feel like I was going to puke now. It hadn't reached the point where I'd been convinced I was going to die. Now if I could just get the tunnel vision to pass and convince my heart to slow down, I'd be all right.

I lifted my gaze and looked at my reflection. Sweat gleamed on my forehead and ran in lazy trickles down my temples. My skin was bright red. Shit—no wonder people always got worried when they saw me do this in public. I looked like I'd just run a marathon, and in my brain, I probably had.

I wiped a shaking hand across my brow. It bugged the hell out of me to be sweaty and not towel it all off, but I didn't trust my equilibrium yet. Another minute or two, and then I'd be steady enough to grab a towel off the rack and fix myself up.

Had this actually been a full-blown panic attack? A milder one than usual, but an attack? I wasn't sure if I'd crossed that line or not. The last few minutes, if it had even been that long, were a terrifying blur of shakiness and nausea and not nearly enough air.

Gripping the counter with both hands again, I locked eyes with my reflection. I breathed slowly and deeply, and step by step, backed myself through everything that had led up to this. I'd come in here because I'd thought I was going to be sick. Somehow, I'd convinced myself to get in here, and that moment had given me back some control, which I'd grabbed on to and used to talk myself down.

Yeah, it was an attack. I hadn't found myself on the floor in a fetal position, so it wasn't a severe one. A plus?

Mild or severe, what had triggered it?

I mentally backtracked again. Past the part where I'd regained control. Past where I'd stumbled in here, expecting to throw up. Past where I'd realized that was a very real possibility in the first place.

I'd been in the living room. Doing what?

My heart tried to speed up. Eyes closed, I took a few more slow

breaths.

Okay. Going to give it a minute.

My legs were steadier now, and my head wasn't so light, so I carefully peeled off my shirt. Then I took a towel off the rack and dabbed my face and neck, and once I felt a bit less sweaty and disgusting, I tossed the towel and shirt into the hamper.

Concentrating on every small milestone, I went upstairs to get a clean shirt. Out of the bathroom. Around the corner. Up the first few steps. The next few. The last few. Into the bedroom. Find a shirt. Put it on. Rearrange my hair until I looked presentable for no reason except it was something to do.

By the time I'd put myself back together, I was calm again. So, steady on my feet, I went back downstairs and cautiously stepped into the living room. I surveyed the room like I was assessing a disaster scene after a tornado or an earthquake—figuring out what had moved, what hadn't, where to start.

My day planner was on the coffee table, open to a calendar page. Next to it, a list of seminars I'd wanted to attend.

Cold water trickled through my veins.

That was it, wasn't it? A scheduling conflict. Two seminars fell on a day when I had three regular clients scheduled. One seminar was up in Seattle. The other was in San Diego. One would open doors to some more athletes. The other would help me refine some Shiatsu techniques.

And then the cost—not to mention lost income from the client appointments I'd have to cancel—had made me balk. Were they worth it? Would I make up for them with new revenue? And should I wait to see if I was getting a divorce first? Pay for a seminar or a lawyer? Earn money or spend money I potentially couldn't afford if this thing got ugly and we had to sell the house and what about flying to see Nate in between and *oh God Nate is in town and probably with Theo* right now *and—*

I grabbed the doorframe and focused on breathing. Okay. Yeah. I'd figured out what had triggered the attack.

But what the hell? I couldn't even deal with Nate and Theo and sort out a scheduling conflict without getting a mental Blue Screen of Death?

I opened my eyes, crossed the living room, and closed the planner. I slipped the list into the back pages, sticking out so I'd remember to look at it later, and set the book in its usual place between the remote and the rack of coasters.

Then I sat down and leaned back against the sofa.

Though the attack had passed and I was calmer now, I still felt raw and shaky. Like it wouldn't take much to send me spiraling

downward again. Like I was on a hair trigger now.

It was no surprise that this had happened, now that I'd thought about it. I'd been twitchy all day. As much as I'd tried to tell myself it wasn't, I saw now that it had only been a matter of time. All day long, ever since Nate had left this morning, I'd had that sick, nervous feeling that said I was getting close to the end of my tether. The stress had been getting to me, and unless I found a way to pull myself back down, I'd known I was going to lose it.

And then I did. And though I was still attached to that tether, it was fraying. Quickly.

I closed my eyes and took more long, slow breaths.

I'd talked myself off the ledge a million times. There was no reason to think I couldn't do it today.

But what if I couldn't? What if this thing got the best of me again? What if—

Cam. Stop.

Rein it in.

Breathe.

It was just stress. I'd been under a lot of it lately. It was bound to take its toll, and apparently for me, the toll was having these breakdowns when I couldn't cope anymore.

Once things were settled with Theo—whether we stayed together or divorced—it would get better. Just had to get *through* it first. Then I'd be fine.

Maybe I needed to schedule a massage for myself. Something to de-stress and decompress. A chance to check out, relax, and—

The doorbell rang.

Oh God. Who the hell is coming over now?

Please be UPS. Wait, did I even order anything? Did Theo or Nate? Shit—do I have to sign for it and then give it to them and will that be weird and—

Fucking breathe.

I stood and headed for the door. When I looked through the peephole, Nate's face—slightly distorted by the walleyed lens—brought a curse to my lips. I should've been happy to see him. And in a way, I was.

But at the same time, his presence brought my blood pressure up a few notches.

Schooling my expression, I unlocked the door and opened it. "Hey. This is a surprise." *I thought you were with him.*

"Yeah, I…" He smiled uneasily, meeting my gaze before dropping his. "Just thought I'd stop by."

"You don't need a reason." I stood aside and gestured for him to come in. "This is your house too."

His lips tightened, but he didn't say anything and stepped inside. Even as I closed and locked the door, he was quiet. So was I. I had no idea what to say. We moved to the kitchen, where I offered him a cup of coffee, but he declined, and I was too damn jittery to have any myself. Otherwise, though, we didn't speak.

This wasn't helping me calm these raw, fraying nerves. Never once—not even the morning after that first impulsive threesome—had things been awkward with Nate. We'd had our ups and downs as a group, and there'd been arguments along the way, but uncomfortable silence…that was a new one. And an unsettling one.

Fuck.

"So, um." I cleared my throat. "What brings you by?"

"Well, I spent the evening with Theo." He eyed me as if he expected some reaction. I didn't give him one, even though my sort-of-husband's name was a punch to the chest. Then he went on, "I, uh… wanted to see you too. Trying to, you know, balance things."

Guilt jabbed me in the ribs. What kind of position were we putting him in?

He shifted his weight. "And I guess I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Not great, but I don't want you to see how bad.

"I'm…" I exhaled. "I'm doing okay."

His eyebrows rose.

"Like I said before, the circumstances suck." I kissed him lightly. "But it *is* good to have you back in town."

Nate smiled, though it seemed forced. "It's always good to see you. Both of you. I just wish…" He lowered his gaze.

"I know." *Me too*. "How's Theo doing?"

Nate exhaled hard and glared at me. "Seriously?"

"What?" The anger in his eyes drove me back a step, and my pulse lurched skyward. "You were just there. So—"

"And you could pick up the fucking phone and ask him yourself."

I blinked. "Um…"

"I'm not going to be your go-between, Cam. I came back to try to help you two come back together, but if you guys can't even communicate enough to ask—"

"All right. All right." I pressed the air with both hands. "I'm sorry. I was just…" *Easy. Breathe. Oh fuck, I really am on a hair trigger. Breathe!* "I'm just concerned about him. You're right—I should call him myself."

Nate exhaled, his shoulders slumping. "If you really want to know, he's having a rough time. Just like you are."

Not sure he's "dealing" with it like I am, but okay.

His eyes narrowed. "How much talking have you guys done?"

"Not much."

Nate's lips thinned. "Wasn't that part of the deal, though? You'd separate for a little while, then try to talk things through?"

"We've tried. It just hasn't gone well."

"So, what next?"

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to think about the next step because I was afraid I knew what it was. "I don't know. I haven't gotten that far yet."

"What are you waiting for?" His tone was chilly, the way it was when his grip on his temper was getting tenuous.

I looked at him, searched his expression, trying to figure out what cards he was holding. "What brought this on? We're going to sort things out, but I don't want to pull you into the middle of—"

"How can I not be in the middle of it? That's…that's kind of the definition of where I am in this relationship."

"I know. And I'm sorry." I exhaled, hoping he couldn't hear how hard my heart was beating. I pressed my palms against the counter, letting the coolness hold my focus. Anything to distract my senses from that panic that was trying to break free again. "This hasn't been easy for any—"

"But are you guys even *trying* to fix this?" he snapped. "Or are you just going to keep saying it isn't easy and fighting until one of you has the balls to say it's really over?"

His renewed anger startled me. I'd fully expected this to hurt him, but Nate was one of those people with a long, long fuse. It always caught me off guard when he got angry anyway, and I hadn't thought he'd get angry over this.

Oh shit. What if he leaves? What if he walks out and—

Breathe. Fucking breathe.

I took a long breath. Released it slowly. "Nate, you have no idea how hard we've worked to—"

"You're right. I don't. You know why?" He stabbed a finger at me. "Because you both kept me in the dark until it was over."

"And what would've changed if we'd told you? We were trying not to distract you while you were out on—"

"Yeah?" He threw up his hands. "And look how that worked out! Things blew up, and now I'm here—tour on fucking hold—so I can try to come up with some Hail goddamned Mary before—" His voice cracked. He cleared his throat but didn't go on speaking and didn't look at me.

I clenched my jaw. What the fuck was his problem? Did he really think coming at me sideways like this was going to help matters?

"You haven't been here, Nate," I said through my teeth. "You have no idea how hard we've been working to—"

"*Are* you, though?" He folded his arms. "Are you guys *really* working on this?"

I stared at him, at a loss for words, and finally managed to feebly repeat, "You haven't been here."

"What do you want me to say?" He narrowed his eyes. "I'm sorry my job took me out on the road? Like we always knew it eventually would? Am I supposed to apologize because I wasn't here to referee —"

"I'm not asking you to apologize." Shit—my heart was going crazy now. "I'm telling you that there's been shit happening here that you weren't around to see, so don't fucking judge—"

"Yeah, but what about the shit that's not happening?" he snapped.

I gritted my teeth. "What are you talking about?"

"You two *talking*! Seriously—when was the last time you guys saw each other in person? Or even talked on the goddamned phone?"

My pulse shot up, and the edges of my vision started darkening again. I started to speak, but the acid in my throat made me think better of it. The tiles beneath my hands were slick with sweat. If I got sick, could I make it to the downstairs bathroom in time? Run now? Take the chance?

"Cam?"

I clenched my jaw. Speaking slowly, concentrating as much on my words as keeping my stomach where it belonged, I said, "It's not as easy…as just sitting down…and talking."

"Then where does it get complicated? Because what I see is both of you hurting like hell, but not doing a damned thing to—"

"What do you want us to do?" I snarled. "Seriously, Nate. Tell me. Because if I knew, don't you think I would have fucking *done it* by now?"

He narrowed his eyes. Then he took a step back. "You know what? I shouldn't have come back to LA. I'm done. I can't…I can't deal with this tonight." He started to go.

Oh God, he is *leaving!*

"Nate, don't go." I forced back the bile rising in my throat. *Bathroom is getting farther away.* "Please."

He turned around, expression hard. "Why the hell should I stay?" His voice wavered—less anger and more of something else that cut even deeper. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to watch you two coming apart like this?"

"I'm right in the middle of it. Of course I know how hard it is."

"Except you could do something about." He swallowed. "All I can do is sit back and watch. And it's fucking killing me."

"I know. I know and I'm…"

Shit. Can't breathe. Can't…oh fuck. Oh fuck, what's happening?

"I'm sorry, Nate." *Am I sweating? Yeah. I'm sweating. Oh shit.* "I'm…" *What was I saying?*

No. Not losing it. Not again. Not in front of Nate.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Tried to.

Shit.

Oh shit.

I really can't…

I can't…

Air…

Fuck…

He touched my shoulder and sounded a million miles away. "You all right?"

"I…" *No. No, I am so not all right.*

"Cam?" Strong arms around me. Too tight. *My chest. Can't breathe. Sick. Gonna—*

I shoved him off and tore across the kitchen. The living room.

Which way? Which—

Right.

I made it into the bathroom, dropped to the floor in front of the toilet, and heaved.

And couldn't breathe. Puked again. *Going dark. I'm gonna die. I'm gonna fucking die. Can't stop puking. Can't breathe. Fuck…*

"Cam." His voice was even farther away now, but his hands were still on my shoulders. Keeping me upright. Kneading gently. Then stroking my hair. "Take it easy. I'm right here."

Slowly—way too slowly—the panic subsided. My pulse came down. My throat burned, but I could breathe.

In the moment, I'd been convinced I was about to die. Now that it was over, I felt like an idiot for freaking out that much. This had happened before. I'd made it through each time even though I'd been sure I was going to have a heart attack or something. As I came back down, I felt stupid. In the moment, though, it had been real. And terrifying.

Fingers combed through my hair, and I jumped.

Fuck. He'd been touching me the whole time, but I'd forgotten Nate was even there.

Which meant he'd been there for the whole thing. Just what I needed

I spat in the toilet, flushed it and, with Nate's help, stood. I pressed my hip against the counter until I was sure my balance had returned. Then I rinsed out my mouth and croaked, "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Sorry?" He put his arm around my shoulders. "You had a panic attack, and you're *apologizing* for it?"

I flinched and kept my eyes down. I'd done my level best to keep this out of everyone's sight. All my life, I'd prided myself on being able to handle anything and everything. Juggling work and school? No problem. Learning an entirely new trade in my thirties? Got it. I wasn't the guy who buckled under stress. I sure as fuck wasn't the guy who buckled this badly.

And now this.

"I think I need a drink."

Nate stiffened. "Cam."

"Not an alcoholic one. Just something cold. That tastes better than…" I gestured at my mouth.

He relaxed a little. "Okay."

We moved into the kitchen. I poured myself some iced tea, and he took some too. Then we sat down in the living room, just inches away from the day planner that had triggered my earlier episode. Jesus. Two within an hour of each other? Or maybe it was just one long one. I had no idea. One thing was for sure—I was fucking exhausted now. I felt like I'd been through the wringer twice. My body ached all over. My head was stuffed with cotton. I was pretty sure there'd be a bruise on my knee tomorrow after hitting the bathroom floor like that. My abs burned, probably from vomiting.

I pressed the iced tea against my forehead. The cold felt nice. Better than anything I'd felt in the last several minutes, so…a plus?

"Cam, look at me." When I did, Nate's brow creased. "When did you start having panic attacks?"

I dropped my gaze again and ran a sweaty hand through my hair. "I think they started when I was working at the bank. The stress was…" I shivered, my skin prickling at the memory. "Investment banking is no joke."

"But…panic attacks?" He touched my arm. "Does Theo know you __"

"*No*." I met his gaze. "And he's not going to know."

Nate's expression hardened. "Cam, for fuck's sake, you—" He held my gaze for a moment, then spoke in a gentler tone. "You've got to talk to him."

"I know." I sighed, and my shoulders sank. "But I'm…" *Terrified. I don't want to lose Theo. Or confirm I already have.*

He chewed his lip, probably wondering what to say.

"I promise, I haven't given up on Theo," I said. "I just don't quite know what to do."

Nate's brow pinched. Then he wrapped his arms around me. "I'm sorry. I had no idea you were falling apart like this."

I winced but returned his embrace. "I'm sorry you're in the middle. I wish we could settle this on our own without dragging you

into it."

"I know." He kissed my cheek, then sat back and held my gaze. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't want you to do anything." I took his hand. "Theo and I will work this out, or we won't. It'll get settled somehow. All I want is for you to…" My chest ached with a million emotions. "Just having you here makes a big difference. Even when you're out on the road."

Nate smiled weakly but genuinely. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you. And…" I hesitated. "The panic attack thing. Let's keep that between us, okay?"

He pursed his lips. "Don't you think Theo should know?"

I shook my head. "I'd rather he didn't."

His Adam's apple bobbed. Finally, he nodded. "Okay. It stays between us."

"Thank you."

That awkward silence tried to creep in again, and I didn't know what to say to break it.

Fortunately, Nate did.

"Why don't I order us some takeout?" He squeezed my leg. "Then we can kick back and watch some dumb movie."

I rolled my shoulders. I wasn't sure how much my stomach could handle at this point, but… "That actually sounds like a really good plan."

Nate smiled. "Okay. You just chill in here, and I'll get food on the way." He started to stand. "Anything sound good?"

"Whatever sounds good to you."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the kitchen.

I leaned back on the couch and closed my eyes. Well, so much for keeping that cat in the bag. But thank God for Nate. Even if he had come over and picked a fight, could I blame him? This was hell for all of us.

At least we'd come back down, and he was still here. Now we could salvage the evening with bad food and a worse movie, and I couldn't think of any way I'd rather spend it.

As he ordered our food in the other room, his voice soothed my nerves. I actually managed to smile.

Yeah, I was a wreck. Yeah, my marriage was in shambles.

But Nate was here tonight.

So maybe I'd be okay after all.

Chapter Eighteen

Theo

The next morning, as I sipped coffee in my brother's kitchen, I could still feel a few aches and twinges from fucking Nate. Funny how even slow, stealthy sex could leave my muscles sore. Probably the exertion of trying to keep it slow and stealthy.

I didn't feel as weird about sleeping with him as I'd felt about sleeping with Cam, but I still felt…weird. Like he'd ditched his tour and come all the way out here to try to pull Cam and me back together, and what did I do? Pull him into bed and fuck him a couple of times. Of course he'd welcomed it and seemed just as eager as I'd been, but did it accomplish anything?

Zach and Taylor shuffled into the kitchen, both bleary-eyed in their bathrobes since they didn't have to leave for their respective jobs for another hour and a half.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning." Taylor smiled sleepily, but Zach said nothing. Whatever. Apparently he still wasn't a morning person.

Ignoring him, I put my coffee aside and went about making myself some breakfast.

"Question," Zach said, icicles hanging off that single word.

I turned around. "Hmm?"

He peered at me over his coffee cup. "Last night. Who the fuck was that guy?"

"What do you mean, who was he? You know Nate."

"Yeah. But what the hell was he doing here?"

I resisted the urge to shift my weight. "He's a friend. He—"

"A friend? Because that's not what it sounded like."

My blood turned cold. How much had he heard? We'd been as quiet as we could be.

"Zach." Taylor glared at him. "Leave him alone. He's got enough to deal with."

"No." My brother put his coffee cup down and narrowed his eyes at me. "You come stay in my house because you're trying to fix your marriage, and then you bring—"

"Fine." I pressed my hands on the edge of the island and glared at him. "You want the God's honest truth?"

"Yes." He folded his arms. "I do."

I moistened my lips. "All right. Nate's my boyfriend."

Zach blinked. Taylor straightened.

"He's my boyfriend, *and* Cam's," I went on. "He's been with us for,

hell, five years now? Almost?"

"So you're 'married,'" Zach said with his ever-present air quotes. "But you're both fucking another guy on the side?"

Taylor shot him a look, but he didn't acknowledge her.

"That's sick, Theo," he said through his teeth. "No fucking wonder you and Cam are breaking up. What did you *think* would happen? What the fuck did you think—"

"Nate is *not* the reason we're separated."

"Yeah?" He laughed humorlessly. "How do you figure?"

I swallowed. "Cam and I did this to ourselves. We fucked up, and we're trying to fix things. If anything—" My voice shook a little. "If anything, Nate's the reason we held on as long as we did."

"Why? Staying together so you both had your fuck buddy?"

I winced. "No. It's…look, it's complicated as hell. But it worked. And we were happy."

"Oh yeah? How'd that work out for you?"

I broke eye contact. There was no way I could explain to my brother how much Nate had brought into my life and my marriage.

"That's what I—"

"Zach, that's enough," Taylor spat.

They exchanged venomous glares. She didn't back down either. I had to hand it to her—she didn't take shit from him like his last two wives.

He turned to me again. "Look, I don't condone what you and Cam were doing, but this?" He shook his head. "*Not* in my house, Theo. No way."

"Fine," I ground out. "I'll start looking for a place after work tonight." Panic fluttered behind my ribs—getting my own place added way too much permanence to our separation, but whatever. "Then I'll be out of your hair. All right?"

"Sounds good to me." He grabbed his coffee off the counter and stormed out.

Thanks, Zach. This is really what I needed to start my day. You're the best.

After he was gone, Taylor sighed heavily and turned to me. "I'm sorry, Theo. He's…"

"You don't have to explain him to me."

"I know. But…" She held my gaze, grimacing apologetically. "You don't need this on top of everything else."

You don't say.

But she meant well, and she was one of the few supports I had left, so I just nodded. "I guess it's par for the course when you don't have a traditional relationship."

"Well." She shifted her weight. "If it's any consolation, I'm glad

you have Nate."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I know this thing with Cam has been a nightmare. So, the fact that you've still got Nate… It's good. Better than having to deal with all this alone, right?"

Except it means we're hurting one more person.

"I guess." I cleared my throat. "Listen, um, I'm going to go finish getting ready for work. Thanks for sticking up for me, though."

"Any time."

I went back into the guest room and closed the door. Alone now, sealed off from everyone and everything, I swore under my breath.

Great.

Now I felt unwelcome in my own house and in my brother's house.

Definitely time to find a new place. No matter how much that felt like another nail in the coffin, it was time. It was necessary.

Suddenly exhausted and depressed, I lay back on the bed. I still had time before work. Right now, I just needed a minute.

I took out my phone and thumbed through all those photos that were still saved on it. It amazed me just how many of them featured Nate, Cam, or both. Sometimes all three of us. Happy. Laughing. Usually making ridiculous faces or cracking up over something one of us had said.

Where the hell did we go wrong?

What are we doing, Cam?

That was an easy answer. We were hurting Nate. We were hurting each other.

And why? That was the part I couldn't sort out in my head. Yes, we'd fought more in the last year than we had in the sixteen before it. But about what? As I ran through those squabbles and screaming matches and long, chilly silences, I couldn't find a common thread. Neither of us had done anything that counted as a deal-breaker. The usual "things that kill a relationship" suspects weren't here—we didn't have kids or a religion to fight over, and our finances were fine. If one of us had cheated, or lied about something, or committed some cardinal sin, then at least we'd have something to focus on. We could decide if it was a big enough issue to end our marriage, or if forgiveness was possible.

I put my phone aside and slipped off my wedding ring. Staring at it in the dim light, I turned the gold band over and over between my fingers.

I'd married him not once, but twice—first ceremonially, then legally—and said the same vows in both ceremonies. At the time, I couldn't even imagine being apart from Cam. I was pretty sure he'd

felt the same way, especially after a conversation we'd had the night before our commitment ceremony.

Sitting in the kitchen of our rental house in that old shitty neighborhood, he'd been looking over the details of the ceremony for the hundredth time.

"You okay?" I asked. "This is the final draft, right?" God knew we'd changed it enough times.

"Yeah. Yeah. But the vows…" He pushed the piece of paper away and eyed it uneasily. "It's funny—you hear people say them all the time, but then when it's your turn…"

"You don't want to say them?"

"It's not that. Just, I guess, some of them are sinking in."

"How do you mean?"

Silently, he chewed his lip.

I shifted my weight. "If you don't want to do this," I whispered, "I'll understand."

Cam shook his head. "It's not that." He clasped both of his hands around mine. "It's just that 'till death do us part' line that kinda makes my skin crawl."

My mouth went dry. I'd thought we were in this for the long haul, but maybe not. "Why?"

"Because it's just a reminder that odds are, unless something happens to both of us at the same time, one of us is going to die." He gulped. "And the other one is going to be alone."

My stomach flipped, and as relief surged through me, I couldn't help but laugh.

Cam's expression hardened. "You think that's funny?"

"No! No. Oh my God. No." I shook my head and brought his hands up to kiss his fingers. "I guess I was just relieved because I thought you were having second thoughts."

"Second thoughts? What?"

"When you said 'till death do us part' bothered you, I thought you meant it was too much of a commitment or something."

"What?" Cam laughed this time. "No, of course not. You're not getting rid of me that easily." Sobering, he pulled me closer. "For what it's worth, I'm not having any second thoughts at all." He touched my face. "I just hate that there's a piece of our vows that reminds me there will probably be a time when we're *not* together."

The words had hit me in the gut, but I'd smiled and kissed him. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. And when we do, it'll be hard, but I'll be right there to the end whether it's my turn or yours."

Later that day, we'd said those vows—till death do us part and all—and I meant every word. When we'd said them again, I still meant them.

And for the life of me, as I lay here in my brother's guest room, on the bed where I'd fucked the boyfriend who was trying to save us, I couldn't put my finger on when that had changed.

Because it hadn't.

It fucking hadn't.

I loved him. I wanted him. I needed him.

How do I bring you back?

Chapter Nineteen

Nate

The next night, I paced in my hotel room, my bare feet near silent on the rough, well-worn carpet.

The last couple of days had been rough. Now I'd seen sides of both my boyfriends that were alarming as fuck. I'd known about Theo's depression for a while, but I hadn't realized the extent of Cam's… anxiety? OCD? I had no idea what it was. All I knew was that it wasn't just being obsessive about tidiness anymore. Panic attacks? Jesus fuck.

I shuddered, hugging myself despite the warmth of the room. I couldn't shake the image of that attack he'd had last night. If it was that scary for me, I could only imagine what it had been like for him. And how often did it happen? How the hell did he *live* like that?

He'd apologized for it too. For someone as obsessively controlled as him, it must've been embarrassing as hell to lose it like that. No wonder he didn't want Theo to know. But how had he kept it hidden from him for so long?

And what would it take for them to show those cards to each other? More to the point—what difference would it make?

Sighing, I raked my hands through my hair. I desperately wanted to figure out how to coax Cam and Theo back to each other, but I was feeling less and less like I *could*. Like anything was going to happen until one of them laid down a card. And right now, neither was willing to show anything.

The best part? I'd been texting with both guys off and on all day while they were at work. Pleasant conversations, thank God. Almost back to normal if I squinted hard enough.

But now they were both on their way home.

And the conversations had both wound up in the same place:

I'd like to see you tonight.

I hadn't responded to either of them. Right now, my phone sat on the nightstand between the beds.

Cursing under my breath, I kept pacing. How the hell was I supposed to respond? Who did I choose over the other?

Cam had made the offer first. But what if Theo needed the company more? What if he was having one of those nights where he felt like he was locked up in carbonite? What the fuck was I supposed to tell him?

Nope, sorry, dude. You're on your own. Gonna go fuck your kind-of-ex-husband.

And what if I chose Theo over Cam? How would Cam take that?

The memory of his panic attack flashed through my mind.

Oh God.

Sorry, Theo. I need to make sure your *kind-of-ex-husband doesn't freak out and have a heart attack.*

I scrubbed both hands over my face. I couldn't take this kind of pressure. This was bullshit. But what was I supposed to *do*?

I loved them both, and I didn't doubt for a second that they loved me. I believed them when they said they weren't going to play me against each other or put me in the middle like a kid in a custody battle.

Of course, some of that was inevitable. Whether any of us wanted me there or not, I *was* in the middle. And on nights like tonight, whether any of us liked it or not, I had to make a choice. I couldn't be in two places at once, and those two wouldn't be in one place to save their lives. Somehow, I had to say no to somebody.

My phone squealed to life with one of my more annoying ringtones. I swore again. Didn't even have to look to know who was calling.

I snatched the phone up off the nightstand. "Yeah, Andy?"

"What's going on, Nate? Any idea when you plan on coming back?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose and mouthed a few more curses. "I—"

"We need you," he growled. "Listen, some of these smaller shows, we can bail without pissing off too many people. But Atlanta's going to be *huge*. I *need* you back onstage by then."

"I know. And I'll be there."

"You'd better be. Or you're going to hear a lot of doors slamming, kid."

I swallowed. "Got it."

We hung up, and I tossed the phone on the bed. Great. Now I had even less time to find some way to bring Theo and Cam back together. My heart sped up. My stomach started doing somersaults.

What do I do?

I glared at my phone. *And what do I do tonight?*

What I needed to do was go to one of them and do…something. Talk about this. Get them closer to the same page so maybe they could reconcile. A calm discussion. Pick through the pieces of their marriage and their separation. Maybe even nudge one of them toward therapy. Or a counselor for both of them. They both needed help, and they needed help together, but starting with one was my best bet right now.

So…which one?

And what if they refused? Or we didn't get anywhere?

If I couldn't help them pull it together now, then I'd have to fly back out, return to my tour, and keep trying from a distance until I could escape to LA again. Which could be weeks. *Months*. Long enough for a divorce to be filed and finalized, if they were really determined.

I was kidding myself if I thought my band—never mind my record company—would put up with much more of this. Taking off for overnight visits when the guys were in town? Fine. That didn't disrupt the tour. Leaving for indefinite periods to resolve nebulous "personal issues" at home? That meant canceled shows, and canceled shows meant money down the shitter. I'd heard about that enough when I'd been forced to cancel some on the last tour because I was too sick to stand, let alone sing. If I kept pushing this—especially when I wasn't sick—that would jeopardize the band's relationship with the record company.

We'd worked too hard to get here.

My shoulders sank. Then my heart did. Failure and I were close acquaintances, but whenever I'd failed, I'd been able to pick myself up, dust myself off, and try again. This was do or die. Now or never. If they didn't get their shit together, it was over. Period.

Was I willing to risk the success of my band for a marriage between two people who quite possibly didn't want to be married anymore? Or couldn't be?

I wanted to say that trying to save their marriage was worth it, and I believed it was, but I had to be pragmatic about this.

I also had to think of myself. And tonight, if there was one thing I needed, it was a reprieve from being in the middle.

With a heavy heart, I sat on the edge of the bed. Picked up the phone. And texted them each with the same message:

Can't tonight. Sorry.

That would probably be a kick in the balls for Theo. God knew what it would do to Cam's blood pressure. If they each thought I'd turned them down in favor of the other, well…nothing I could do about that.

Tonight, I'd rest and regroup. Collect my thoughts.

Tomorrow…

Well, I'd figure that one out in the morning.

For now, I pulled my notebook out of my bag, lay back on the otherwise empty bed, and wrote like my life depended on it.

Chapter Twenty

Cam

Well, that answered that.

I turned my phone over and put it on the coffee table. Exhaling, I leaned back on the couch and closed my eyes.

Nate had every right to see Theo. I didn't hold it against either of them. Admittedly, though, I was envious. Of both of them—Theo because he had Nate tonight, Nate because he still had Theo at all.

And if I knew them, I knew exactly what they'd be doing once they were behind closed doors together. Theo could never keep his hands off Nate. Nate could never get enough of the way Theo kissed.

Goose bumps sprang up on my arms, and I shivered. I shouldn't have even been thinking about what they were doing. This was part of the deal. Nate and Theo were free to see each other. Nate had made his choice, and I couldn't hold that against him. Another night, it'd be me in Theo's place. Dwelling on what they were doing tonight would only drive me crazy.

Especially since it wasn't jealousy that had me dwelling on it. I hated myself for acknowledging it, but…the mental images were smoking hot. I knew all too well what the two of them looked and sounded like together. I knew what it was like to kiss my husband's neck and smell our boyfriend's cologne, and what a bite mark on Nate's shoulder felt like when I ran my fingers over it. How Nate couldn't keep his hands out of Theo's hair. The way Theo didn't hold back and pounded Nate's ass until they were both almost in tears. Nate's strangled cries when Theo bit his shoulder.

My cock was rock hard just from thinking about them. To hell with it. Wasn't like I was going to be sleeping with anyone tonight, so I might as well take care of this myself.

I didn't even bother going from the couch to the bedroom. I was sure if I moved, the fantasy would vanish, and I wasn't letting this one go.

Sitting back, I unbuckled my belt and unzipped my pants. As soon as I wrapped my fingers around my cock, I was out of breath. Just like Nate would be once Theo had his hands on him. Those two were relentless with each other. They both liked the kind of rough sex that left marks. Nate could handle the way Theo liked to fuck. That deep, violent thrusting that was too much for me was exactly how Nate loved it, and Theo was always thrilled to oblige.

And I was always thrilled to watch. Sometimes Nate would suck my cock while Theo fucked him. Sometimes he'd be too far gone—

eyes closed, lips apart, whimpering and begging for more as Theo slammed into him again and again.

Eyes shut tight, I pumped my dick as I thought of my husband and boyfriend, naked and hard and sweaty. In my mind, Theo was on his knees behind Nate, fucking him violently. He grabbed Nate's short hair and jerked his head back so I could see the lust written all over his expression. Nate's eyes were screwed shut, his face and neck flush and his mouth open in a soundless cry, and he balanced on one arm while he pumped his dick like I was pumping mine.

The Nate in my fantasy struggled to hold himself up on a shaking arm, and then he shuddered hard, and in the same instant, Theo threw his head back. Slammed himself into Nate. Knocked Nate all the way down onto his forearms.

And I gasped, semen erupting onto my hand as my back arched and my vision went white. The fantasy vanished, but I kept stroking until I couldn't take anymore.

Then I sagged against the back of the couch, staring up at the ceiling with tear-blurred eyes. Holy shit. If I'd come this hard just thinking about them, I could only imagine how much they were turning each other on.

Licking my lips, I smiled to myself.

Good. I hope they enjoy every second. They both deserve it.

* * * * *

"Oh, thank you." Margaret, my second client of the day, smiled as we stepped out of the room where she'd just had her massage. "I feel so much better."

"You're welcome." I returned the smile. "That's what we're here for."

I walked out behind her, and as she left, I scanned the waiting room to see if any walk-ins were waiting. The chairs were all empty except one, and when my gaze landed on that one, I did a double take so hard, I thought my neck would snap. "Nate? What are you doing here?"

He'd been sitting in one of the overstuffed chairs in the waiting area and slowly rose. Tucking his hands in his pockets, he shrugged. "I just wanted to see you."

"Oh." I blinked. "Well, it's a pleasant surprise."

He smiled faintly, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly, which somehow emphasized the shadowy circles. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

Probably had a long night last night.

I schooled my expression—he'd had every right to be with Theo.

He lifted his eyebrows. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Of course. I’ve got some time.” I gestured for him to follow me, and led him into the room where I’d given Margaret her massage. I shut the door behind us, sealing us into this tiny room and keeping the rest of the world outside. “This is unexpected.”

“I know. I just wanted to see you.” He swallowed. “So, how are you doing? After, um, the other night?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I broke eye contact. “I’m good. It… That kind of thing, it doesn’t last long. Feels like forever when it’s happening, but once it’s over…” I shrugged.

“Good. Good.” He studied me. “I had no idea that happened to you.”

I would’ve liked to keep it that way.

“I’m okay. I really am.”

“You know that’s treatable, right?”

I looked at him again, setting my jaw. “I don’t need drugs. I just need to get through this, and I’ll be fine.”

Nate’s lips tightened, but he didn’t push the issue.

I shifted my weight. “How are you doing?”

“I’m…” Nate closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “That’s why I’m here, actually. I wanted to see you and all, but I’m…kind of having a rough time, to be honest.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

He turned like he was going to start pacing, made it about two steps, and stopped. Rubbing the back of his neck, he said, “This thing with you and Theo is killing me.”

Safely out of his sight, I winced. “I know.” I put my hands on his waist. When he didn’t try to pull away, I gently drew him into an embrace and kissed the side of his neck. “I wish there was a way we could make this easier for you.”

He sighed, leaning his head against my shoulder. “I know. And I don’t know what to do. I love you both, Cam. But I feel guilty when I’m with either of you.”

I bit back a response that he shouldn’t feel guilty. I shouldn’t have been having panic attacks over scheduling conflicts, but I did, so I didn’t have a leg to stand on to tell him his feelings were wrong.

He gently freed himself from my grasp. This time, he sat on the edge of the massage table and gazed at me with exhausted eyes. “Last night…” He raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “Theo was texting me at the same time you were.”

Jealousy tightened my chest, but I schooled my expression, refusing to let it show.

“You were both asking me to come to you,” he went on. “Being kind of flirty, like always. But…separately. And I turned him down

too."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I couldn't…" He released a long, defeated breath. "I can't choose between you guys, you know?"

"I know." I sat beside him on the table and clasped his hand in mine. "This is something Theo and I talked about a lot when we decided to separate. We both knew there was no way to do this without putting you in the middle. And I'm sorry. But we weren't going to leave you out in the cold either."

Eyes down, he nodded. "I've never doubted that. I think it was kind of inevitable."

"Unfortunately. None of us have much experience with anything like this."

He laughed humorlessly. "Probably aren't too many books on the subject either."

"Nope."

He met my gaze, but only for a second. "The thing is, I came home because I can't cope with being this far away while you guys are going through this." He rubbed his neck again, and I could see the stiffness from here, the muscles like cables beneath his skin. "But being here, seeing it up close…"

"I'm sorry." I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and kissed his cheek. "I know I've said that a lot, and it probably doesn't mean much by now, but I really, really mean it."

"I know you do."

Eyes closed, I just held on to him. Sometimes I thought the worst thing about this whole separation was what it did to Nate. Theo and I had torpedoed our marriage somehow, and no matter what we tried, we couldn't fit the pieces back together, but Nate had done nothing wrong. Now he was even risking his career—not to mention doing bad things to his own emotional health—to try to help us.

"I wish we could've done more to keep you from—"

"Don't." He shook his head and pulled back enough to look me in the eye. "I know you guys haven't done any of this to hurt me. Or each other."

"It still happened, though." I tipped up his chin and kissed him. "I love you, and so does Theo. That hasn't changed."

"Sometimes I wish it did."

I blinked. "What?"

Nate's shoulders sagged. He drew me closer and leaned into me, and as I held him, he said, "I could never in a million years choose between you two. But sometimes I think it would be easier if one of you had made the choice."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "So you wouldn't be in the middle of a

tug-o-war."

"Exactly." He rested a hand on my leg. "I don't want to lose either of you, though."

"I know. Hopefully it'll get easier for everyone. Once we get our shit together." *Right? Someone tell me how this works!* I smoothed his hair. "Everything is still settling."

Nate sighed but said nothing.

"None of us thought a three-way relationship would work until we tried it," I said. "But we figured it out, didn't we?" I kissed the top of his head. Not sure who I was really trying to convince, I added a quiet, "This just needs time too."

"I don't think making a three-way relationship work ever hurt like this."

God, Nate. I closed my eyes and held him tighter. "I am so sorry." Every time I said it, it sound more useless than the time before.

"We'll all get through it," he said. "I'm not sure how, but…"

Our eyes met. I wasn't sure what to add, and he didn't add anything, so I did the next best thing—drew him into a long kiss.

Jesus. Finally. Something that felt *good*. Not that that was ever a surprise when I was with Nate. Whether we were in bed or just kissing lazily on a massage table in my clinic, I couldn't help but feel good like this.

Nate broke away, but didn't let me go. He ran his fingers through my hair. "I should, um, let you get back to work."

"You can stay as long as you need to." I cupped his face and smiled as genuinely as I could. "I don't get to see you very often—I'm not going to kick you out."

His smile looked as forced as mine felt. "But you've got clients."

I glanced at the clock on the wall, then shrugged and faced him. "Not for a little while."

He held my gaze, and finally, his smile seemed real. As he slid his arms up my chest and around the back of my neck, he said, "I could probably stay for a few more minutes."

"A few more?" I grinned, tilting my head and leaning in. "Define a few?"

His lips brushed mine. "I'll keep you posted."

"Deal."

Chapter Twenty-one

Theo

This separation had definitely been an exercise in sucking it up and doing things I didn't want to do. Today was no exception—Cam and I needed to talk. Face-to-face. Like fucking adults. The silence was killing me, this whole disaster was killing Nate, and the only way any of this was going to improve was if Cam and I faced it down and did something about it.

Unless he'd changed his schedule recently, he was working at the clinic today, and that was close to my office. So, on my lunch break, I drove over, and sure enough, his car was out front.

I could've called, but I wanted him to know I was serious. Even if all we had now was a thirty-second interaction to plan something for later, he'd know this was important enough to me that I'd driven over here to see him in person. I hoped, anyway.

In the parking lot outside the gleaming tinted-glass clinic, I stepped out of the car and into the blazing SoCal heat. As I walked into the waiting area, I took off my sunglasses and hooked them in my collar. I didn't recognize the receptionist, but that wasn't a huge surprise. I hadn't been here in a while.

She smiled up at me. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"Yes, actually. Is Cam here?"

She gestured over her shoulder. "He's with a client, but he should be done shortly. Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I'm…" I hesitated, not sure how he'd want me to explain myself. "Personal visit."

"Oh. Well, he should be out in a few minutes."

"Thank you." I didn't sit. I was way too restless for that. Instead, I hovered near the fish tank, watching the colorful tropical fish making their laps above the bright pink rocks and in between enormous fake seashells. A few times, Cam and I had discussed getting a tropical-fish tank for the house, but invariably, he'd come home from the clinic and put the kibosh on the idea.

"Nope," he'd say, shaking his head as he hung up his keys, "way too much of a pain in the ass."

So we'd never had one, and that was fine. If I needed my tropical-fish fix, I just came in here. Usually got a massage from Cam while I was at it.

"Just came to visit the fish," I'd tell him. "But as long as I'm here…"

"Oh shut up," he'd laugh.

The memory made me chuckle. And shiver, because it was rare for me to leave this place without a happy ending. Maybe someday we'd get to that point again.

A door opened in the back, and I turned around.

Cam came into the waiting room, saw me, and stopped in his tracks.

And behind him, so did Nate.

"Theo." Cam gulped. "This is a…surprise."

Tell me about it.

I moistened my suddenly dry lips. "I, um…" Well, I supposed now I knew why Nate hadn't been available last night. Setting my shoulders back, I met my husband's gaze. "I was just coming by to see if you had some time to talk. Maybe later, though?"

"Um. Sure. Yeah. Let me…" Cam gestured over his shoulder. "Can I grab my planner? Check when my last appointment is done?"

"Yeah. Okay."

He gave Nate another glance, then disappeared into the back. Suddenly those fish were more interesting than ever, and in uncomfortable silence, Nate and I watched them swim.

I shifted my gaze, and Nate's reflection made my heart speed up. So, he'd been visiting Cam. Which was his right. And it was no surprise, was it? After all, I'd fully expected that he'd turned me down last night because he was with Cam. And I was fine with that.

I just…hadn't expected to see them here. Now. The next day.

What were they doing back there, anyway? I knew just how much Cam could get away with at the clinic. We'd both mastered the art of silent blowjobs in here.

Nate's hair was a little mussed, but that could've been because of anything. He could've been running his hand through it. Scratching an itch. Or it might've been Cam's hand. Maybe Cam had given him a massage. Or he'd had other reasons to have his hand in Nate's hair.

The memory of Cam's fingers in my hair—trailing over my scalp in the middle of a kiss or stroking gently right before he grabbed on—sent goose bumps down my spine.

I shook myself. I refused to let jealousy get the best of me. I had no right to be jealous or angry. This was what we'd agreed to do. I knew damn well the two of them were still seeing each other, still sleeping together, just like Nate and I were.

So why did I feel Nate slipping away?

"Okay." Cam's voice startled me, and Nate and I both turned around. Cam had that ever-present blue planner on his arm, open to the calendar. "My last client is done at five." He looked at us. "Do you want to come by the house? We can do dinner?"

Nate's eyes flicked back and forth between us.

I chewed my lip. “Yeah. Sure. I’m off at my usual time.” We held each other’s gazes. Then I added, “Maybe this should be all three of us.”

Nate stiffened. Cam jumped. They glanced at each other before turning to me.

“Are you sure?” Nate asked. “I mean, if you guys want me there, I’ll be happy to come.”

“It might not be a bad idea,” Cam said. “Settle some of this as…” He gestured at all three of us. “A group.”

I nodded. “That’s what I was thinking.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me,” Nate said.

“Me too.” Cam looked at his watch. “I have a client coming in now, though. So I guess I’ll see you both tonight?”

I nodded. So did Nate.

Nate and Cam exchanged glances and whispered good-byes but didn’t touch. I told myself that was because they were in Cam’s place of business, not because I was standing here.

Then Nate and I walked out together. On the way out, I caught a glimpse of Cam in the tinted glass as he watched us go. Tonight was going to be fun, wasn’t it?

I cringed inwardly and kept walking.

Outside, we stepped around to the side of the building where my car—and presumably his—was parked. There, safely out of the clinic’s view, we both stopped.

“Listen, um…” Nate gulped. “Cam and I, we didn’t do anything. I mean, we…we just made out a little. We—”

“Nate.” I fought the urge to take his hand right here in public, and just looked him in the eye. “It’s okay. You’re with him and with me. I’m not going to police what you guys do.”

It’s not supposed to hurt this much when you’re with him instead of me.

Get a grip, Theo. Jesus.

“Still.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I guess it’s a lot tougher than I thought it would be. Trying to balance things.”

“I know. We’re all still adjusting. Believe me.”

His lips tightened. “Last night, I…” He deflated a little. “I wanted to be with both of you. I know that isn’t possible right now. I get it. But it hurt so bad to even think about choosing between you…” He lifted his gaze, eyes shining a bit more than before. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” God, I wanted to touch him. “If there’s one thing Cam and I have agreed on, even when shit was hitting the fan, it’s that we don’t want you caught in the middle. Neither of us wants to lose you, and neither of us will ever make you choose.”

“I know. But I…” He stepped a little closer to me. “I came out

here to try to help fix this. Fix, you know, us."

I wanted to tell him there was nothing between us that needed fixing, but how could that be true? The relationship I had with him had always been tied to the ones we each had with Cam, and to the three-way one we all shared. No matter what, the fact that one of those relationships was broken was bound to affect the others. My split with Cam was like a loose thread, and if we made it permanent, would pulling that thread cause the rest to come unraveled?

"Come here," I whispered, and pulled him into a hug. If the press saw us, they could say what they wanted. And Nate didn't resist. He wrapped his arms around me and sighed as he held me tight.

"If there's one thing I've never doubted through this whole debacle," I said softly, "it's how I feel about you."

Nate let me go and smiled slightly. "I just wish there was something I could do to help you and Cam."

"We'll see how tonight goes. But right now, my concern is everything between us."

"There's nothing to be concerned about," he said. "We're okay."

"Are you sure?"

The smile broadened a little, and he drew me into another hug. "Yeah. We're okay."

And thank God for that.

* * * * *

This was easily the weirdest, least comfortable meal I'd ever shared with Nate and Cam.

For the last half hour, we'd all been seated in silence at the dining room table. We didn't dare do this out in public. Not with the press hounding Nate. They'd already caught wind that he'd canceled a few shows without explanation and flown back to Los Angeles for undisclosed reasons—I suspected there were more than a few reporters and photographers prowling around for a shot at disclosing those reasons.

So Cam had made a light pasta, and now we sat at the mahogany dining room table I'd inherited from my grandmother. No one made a sound aside from the occasional utensil scraping a plate as we all picked at the food. Cam was an amazing cook, and what little I'd eaten had been delicious. I just didn't have an appetite. Neither did they, apparently.

This wasn't working. Was it too uncomfortable to bring up our bullshit in front of Nate? Or would we be like this even if it was just me and Cam?

You know it would be.

Maybe we needed to crack open a few bottles of wine, get as shit-faced as we could without blacking out, and let the alcohol do the talking. That probably wouldn't *fix* much, but it would sure get everything out on the table in a hurry.

Nate set his fork down and nudged his barely touched plate aside. "So…I guess…" His eyes flicked toward me, then Cam. "We're all here."

"Yeah." Cam put his fork down too. "So, maybe we should talk."

He shifted his gaze toward me. Then Nate did the same.

It was hard not to draw back away from both of them. The double scrutiny was unnerving.

My fork was the last one down. Apparently we'd all given up on trying to eat. Thank God.

"Well." I pushed my plate aside. "Where do we start?"

We exchanged silent, uncomfortable glances.

"Um." Nate squirmed in his seat. "Maybe…at the beginning? Why you guys broke up in the first place?"

I winced. I hated the idea of talking about this separation in past tense. We hadn't broken up *yet*. Not completely, anyway.

"Seriously," Nate said, almost whispering. "You guys were so happy before. And then I went out on the road, and suddenly everything fell apart. I don't understand."

"I don't know what changed," Cam said. "Just…over time, something did. And suddenly it was really hard to live with each other."

I gritted my teeth. It didn't take much to read between the lines.

Just say it, Cam. Say I've become impossible to live with.

"Yeah," I said. "There's only so much a man can take of being nitpicked to death."

Cam's eyebrows rose.

Nate drew back a little. From the wide-eyed way he glanced back and forth between us, I had a feeling he'd bitten off more than he could chew by getting this conversation started.

Guilt formed a lead ball in my gut. This was the tentative beginning of a discussion that could quickly turn into one of those fights that got the cops called on us. Cam and I were already circling each other like sharks, taking little bites and feeling each other out. It wouldn't take long for some blood in the water to set us both off, and then there was no shutting it down until we were hoarse or I left.

Nate didn't need to see that.

I cleared my throat. "Maybe this isn't a good time for this."

"Then when *is* a good time?" Cam snapped, making both of us jump. "Because every time we've tried to talk, we get nowhere. Because we don't…fucking…*talk*." He narrowed his eyes. "Or is that

nitpicking?"

Nate gulped.

I sighed, my shoulders sinking under an invisible weight. "What do you want me to say, then? Because most of the shit I want to bring up, I'm afraid to."

"Afraid to?" He eyed me. "Why?"

"It's all kind of a minefield, don't you think?" I shrugged to try to dislodge that weight but still felt it pressing down on me. "I can bring something up, and we can talk, and then out of nowhere, we're screaming about it."

I kept my gaze fixed on Cam, but in my peripheral vision, Nate fidgeted. Guilt burrowed deeper. He really didn't need to be here for this.

Cam pressed his elbows onto the table and steepled his fingers under his chin. Subtly but unmistakably, his nostrils flared. In a calm, even voice, he asked, "Like what, exactly?"

Everything. Jesus fuck. *Everything.*

"Well." I glanced at Nate, who looked as uncomfortable as I imagined he felt. *I am so sorry, Nate.* Turning to Cam again, I said, "I don't think we've been able to talk about my design work without fighting in…shit, six months? Better part of a year?"

Cam's lips thinned, and I knew there was blood in the water.

Nate drummed his fingers on the table. "What's…what's going on with the design work?"

Cam and I locked eyes.

You explaining it? Or am I?

After a few tense seconds, I turned to Nate. "The design stuff hasn't been going all that well. And Cam's tried to hook me up with a few gigs, but—"

"But you've found excuses not to take half of them," Cam said through his teeth.

I exhaled, slowly letting my gaze slide back toward him. "Am I required to take on every potential client who comes my way?"

"Of course not. But when you're worrying yourself sick about not making enough money, and then you're turning down—"

"It's not that simple," I ground out.

"Then what the hell's the problem?" He threw up his hands. "Because you've been taking on less and less design work but freaking out more about money, and the solution seems to be right there in front of—"

"Whoa," Nate said. "Easy, guys. Come on." He patted the air with both hands. "There's got to be a way to talk through this without fighting."

Cam sat back in his chair and slowly released a breath. "I'm sure

there is. It's just hard not to get frustrated."

There was an unspoken *with him* tacked onto the end of that statement, but I didn't give him the satisfaction of a flinch.

Nate folded his hands on the table. "Okay, well…I'm not…I mean, I'm no counselor or anything. So I don't really know what I'm doing." He swallowed. "But maybe we should figure out why this is such a problem."

They both turned to me again.

I tried hard not to squirm. "What do you want me to say?"

"Why haven't you taken on the clients?" Nate's tone was gentle, but it was difficult not to read an accusation into the question.

I swept my tongue across my lips. "Sometimes they're just not a good fit. They want something I'm not confident doing, or…" *Or they send me the request when I can barely get out of bed, never mind interact with Photoshop*. I muffled a cough. "Any number of reasons."

"But Theo." Cam shook his head. "You were doing so well with it for a while, and then it just suddenly went off a cliff. I don't understand why."

I couldn't look at him. "Then maybe you should've asked instead of brow-beating me for—"

"Oh for fuck's sake." Cam pushed his chair back and rose. He gathered his plate and silverware and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, rattling and clattering with a running faucet in the background told me he'd started cleaning the kitchen, which meant he wasn't coming back until it was completely done.

I hated myself for it, but I was relieved that he was gone. Now I could breathe, even if it was just for as long as it took Cam to clean up. There was a time when I would've gone and asked if he needed my help. These days, I knew all too well that would only make things worse. We'd get in each other's way. He'd find something wrong with everything I was doing. I'd get frustrated with him practically scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush just because we'd made a meal in there.

No, even if we weren't fighting, it was best to let him handle things on his own.

"That went well," Nate muttered, and laid his napkin on the table.

"Yeah. Sorry you had to see it."

He said nothing. Guilt burned even hotter in my chest now. I felt like an ass for taking that last swipe at Cam. It was true—brow-beating me instead of asking me the problem wasn't going to solve anything—but maybe I could've been less of an ass about it.

"I really think you guys need to find a counselor," Nate said.

"I'm not sure how much they'd help. The first thing they'll tell us is to cut you loose." Just thinking about that made my stomach turn.

“LA’s about as progressive as you can get,” he said. “There has got to be someone in this town who works with people like us.”

“I can look, but…” I shook my head. “I don’t know. The last couple of months, we’re basically down to this. Either we can talk calmly about absolutely nothing, or we can try to get into something that needs discussing, and…” I gestured at the empty seat.

Nate stared at Cam’s chair. Then he sighed, his shoulders sinking, and with what seemed like a ton of effort, he started to get up. “Maybe this was a bad idea.” He gathered his utensils and put them on his plate. “You guys need someone who gets paid to do this and knows what they’re doing. All I can do is just…” He met my gaze. “There isn’t much I can do, is there?”

“It’s not for you to fix. This is our mess. We’ll…” Fix it? Not likely, if the last few weeks were anything to go by. “We’ll figure something out.”

He nodded. Then, without a word, took his plate and silverware into the kitchen.

I leaned forward, elbows on the table and a hand over my eyes. I was fucking exhausted. Demoralized. Absolutely drained with no idea what the hell I was supposed to do now.

In the kitchen, the sounds of dishes and water had stopped. Cam and Nate spoke in hushed tones, but I couldn’t make out anything they said.

Then the dishes and faucet started up again, and a second later, Nate reappeared in the dining room. “Listen, um…” He folded his arms loosely. “I’m gonna take off.”

“Okay.” I rose. “I’m sorry you’ve—”

“I know.” His voice was soft but firm. “I just think you guys might stand a better chance of sorting this out if I’m not here. I don’t know. I —”

“It’s okay.” I stepped closer. “I’d rather you weren’t right in the middle of it. Hell, maybe he and I need to fight and get this all out in the open. I don’t know.”

Nate kept his eyes down, but shifted his weight, tightening his arms across his chest.

“Don’t give up on us,” I whispered.

At that, he lifted his gaze. “I could say the same to you.”

“I haven’t given up.” Cautiously, I reached for him, and he didn’t recoil when I touched his face. “It’s just going to take some time and work. But I’m not giving up.” *Yet.*

Subtly, he nodded. “Okay.”

“Come here.” I pulled him into my arms and, for a moment, just held him. “I love you, Nate.”

“I love you too.” He lifted his head and kissed me lightly. “I think

we all just need some breathing room tonight." His eyes darted toward the kitchen, then back to me. "*All* of us."

I nodded. "I agree."

We shared one more long, tender kiss. Then, holding my breath, I let him go. He met my eyes for a split second and, without another word, walked out of the dining room.

When I was sure Nate was gone, I steeled myself and moved into the kitchen. Maybe a fight was what we needed, but I sure as fuck wasn't looking forward to it.

Cam didn't look up. His brow was pinched, and he was focused intently on scrubbing a plate so hard, I was surprised he didn't snap the damn thing in half.

When he stopped, his hands were shaking. Badly. And when he reached for the dishrag, sweat glinted off his forehead.

Quietly, I asked, "Cam, are you—"

"I'm fine." He glared at me, eyes daring me to challenge him.

I put up my hands. "Take it easy. You're just shaky. I've never—"

"I'm *fine*," he snarled.

I took a step back. "Okay. Okay."

Cam broke eye contact, and paused for a long, deep breath. As he released it, I swore he…shuddered? Shivered? Then, hand still shaking, he put the plate in the drying rack and reached for another.

In my mind's eye, I swore I could see the next few minutes playing out on two different possible timelines. On one, we argued. I pushed. He needled. We yelled. Cops came.

The other hurt even more. I saw myself putting a hand on his back and, with the other, gently grasping his wrist.

Cam, I could hear myself saying. *Let's go sit down and talk.*

He'd resist at first, tensing next to me and refusing to look at me. But then he'd sigh. Put the plate down. And we'd sit on the couch and talk things through until I knew why he was shaking and sweating, and the night would end with us peacefully in our bed together.

My throat ached as I pushed away that image and all its accompanying emotions. That timeline wasn't going to play out, because that wasn't who we were anymore.

How do we get that back?

It wasn't happening tonight. We'd already hit too many nerves, and we were both too tense and far too ready for a fight. The best bet? Sleep on it. Call him tomorrow. Try again.

I coughed, which made him jump, and I spoke in the gentlest voice I could. "I, um…I'm gonna go."

Cam lifted his gaze. Then he nodded and returned his attention to cleaning.

I didn't know if the unspoken *don't let the door hit you on the way*

out was in my imagination, but it didn't matter. We'd both done enough damage tonight.

So without another word, I left.

With every mile, I felt a little worse. A little lower. I hadn't had high hopes for tonight, but this was worse than I'd anticipated. We'd barely grazed the subject of our faltering relationship, and suddenly Cam couldn't stay in the same room, Nate couldn't stay in the same house, and I couldn't bring myself to fight about the same shit again because I knew it wouldn't help.

And I was pretty sure I didn't have it in me to fight anyway. I was beyond exhausted.

Why were we even trying anymore? This was hopeless. Cam could barely stand the sight of me. Nate was stressed out from trying to pull us back together. After this evening, it was impossible not to feel Nate slipping away or believe Cam was anything but gone.

No.

There had to be a way to fix this. There fucking *had* to be.

But what the hell was it?

Chapter Twenty-two

Nate

As I walked toward the hotel, my stomach flipped.

Cameras. Microphones. Reporters lurking around like vultures.

Please tell me they're here for someone else.

It was entirely possible. I'd caught sight of a couple of A-list actors slipping out the back this morning. I swore I'd seen a country singer hiding beneath a baseball cap on his way to the elevator. So the media mob could've easily been there for them.

Then someone turned, and she did a double take. Her spine straightened.

Fuck.

Instantly, as if every one of them were telepathically connected, the whole group turned my way.

"Mr. Keller!" One of them broke into a jog.

Photographers hurried toward me, and flashes started going off in my face.

I swore under my breath. Whoever had tipped them off that I was staying here…

Head down, shoulders hunched, I strode through the mob as fast as I could. I'd learned a long time ago that they wouldn't touch someone unless they wanted a lawsuit, so I'd stopped being intimidated and walked right through the middle. That wasn't to say they didn't get close—a couple of lenses nearly grazed my face, and my sleeves brushed a few microphones.

It was the shouting that made me want to break into a run, though.

"Nate! Over here! Why are you staying here instead of at home?"

"Nate, tell us what brought you home and made you cancel performances!"

I gritted my teeth and kept moving. I couldn't handle this. Not today. Please, God, not today.

"Mr. Keller! Is it true that Alien Emissary is—"

"Mr. Keller, tell us what's really happening between you, Jill, and __"

"Is it true you came back to Los Angeles for rehab? Or—"

I halted, my shoe squeaking on the pavement. Blood pounded in my ears as I turned around. It nauseated me, facing down all the camera lenses and microphones that seemed like eyes and appendages of some squirming black alien creature.

They'd amused me in the beginning. Then they'd annoyed me.

Sometimes they pissed me off, especially when I knew they were concocting stories about my bandmates and touring mates, as if they didn't know or care how much that could hurt people.

Tonight, I couldn't muster up any annoyance or anger. I was just exhausted. Completely wrung out and drained.

I shrugged. "What do you guys want?"

The lenses and microphones twitched. The reporters behind them exchanged glances.

I took a deep breath. "I'm just a guy, okay? I'm nothing exciting. And right now, I've got some things I need to deal with that I'm pretty sure none of you would want to deal with while you had cameras chasing you down. Can I just—" My voice cracked, and I had no doubt that would be all over the Internet in the next few minutes. "Can I just have a little privacy right now? Please?"

The photographers and reporters exchanged glances. Uneasy silence descended.

Had I actually gotten through to them? Did they get it?

All at once, they exploded with more questions.

"Can you just tell us if—"

"Are Alien Emissary breaking up, or—"

"Mr. Keller, one question, please! Is it true that you're involved with your guitarist?"

Oh for God's sake. I rolled my eyes and bit down on a "fuck off" because that would be the only thing that made it into the media. Without a word, I turned on my heel and continued toward the lobby, the mic-and-camera creature staying right behind me the whole way.

At the door, two of the hotel's enormous security guards stepped out.

"You're on private property," one of them calmly told the mob. "If you follow our guest into the building, we will have the police remove you."

I walked past them, into the hotel, and hurried toward the elevator without looking back. Thank God for hotel security.

By the time I reached the elevator, I was shaking. My chest was tight. Aching. My eyes burned. No, I was not going to lose it out here. Not where a stray camera or a curious passerby might notice. I just had to get up to my room, shut the door behind me, and then do whatever I had to do. Cry. Curse. Something.

The elevator took me to my floor, and somehow, I managed to wrangle the key card, touch the sensor, and unlock the door. I shut the door behind me, leaned against it, and released a long breath.

Now that I was alone, I almost wished I was back downstairs in the parking lot, facing down the cameras and microphones. Somehow, that seemed better than being alone with my thoughts.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

Groaning, I pushed myself off the door and shuffled toward the bed. I sank onto the edge, pulled out my phone, and called the only person I could think of who might be able to help me unscrew my brain.

Bless the girl, Jill picked up on the second ring. "Hey, hon. I was just wondering about you."

"That makes two of us."

"What does that mean?"

I covered my eyes with one hand and sighed. "I'm fucking losing it."

"What's going on?"

"It's Cam and Theo." I stared up at the ceiling. "They're really a mess. Not just as a couple."

"What do you mean?"

"Cam is a nervous wreck. He's always been kind of a neat freak, but I swear, he's a step away from…I mean, he's getting into OCD territory now."

"Does he *have* OCD?"

"Not that I know of. I mean, it isn't really my area of expertise. But something is off. And he's been having panic attacks too."

"Panic attacks? Oh my God."

"I know. This isn't like him at all. Or at least I didn't think it was. Maybe I was wrong. And Theo. Holy shit." I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. "Sometimes he's okay. Other times, it's like he's not even there."

"Is he on something?"

"No, but I'm starting to think he needs to be." I dropped my hand and rested my head against the headboard. "As long as I've known him, he's occasionally gotten depressed, but lately…" I swallowed. "It's worse every time I see him. He's starting to scare me."

"Wow. You think they're both just having a hard time with their split?"

"I don't know. I have no idea." Staring up at the ceiling, I said, "They've both kind of been a mess for a while, so I don't know if it's suddenly worse because they're separated, or if it was a sign that they should've been trying to fix shit a long time ago. I really don't. But…it is what it is now, and I don't know what to do."

"I'm not sure there's much you can do," she said, her voice soft. "You can't fix them if they won't fix themselves."

"I can't just let them self-destruct, though. There has got to be something—"

"Nathan. *Listen* to me."

I shut up. When she called me by my full first name, she wasn't

fucking around.

She took a breath. “Lately, I’ve been hearing two things coming out of your mouth. One, what the guys need. Two, what the band needs. What about what *you* need?”

“What I need is for them to—”

“That’s not what I asked.” She paused. “Honey, I want you to think completely selfishly right now. And I want you to think realistically too.”

“Okay…”

“What do *you* need to be okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you only have so many options. You’ve done everything you can think of to bring Theo and Cam back together, and it hasn’t worked. That’s on them. Not you. But you’re still a wreck. You need to make a decision about how to help yourself.” She paused. “Even if it hurts them.”

“Are you trying to suggest that I should leave?”

“No. I’m suggesting that you’re killing yourself trying to help them, and you’re killing yourself trying to be there for the band as well. You need to help *you*, Nate.”

I stared at the ceiling. “Why do I get the feeling that what I need and what I want aren’t the same thing?”

“They usually aren’t.”

My stomach twisted and somersaulted. “I guess I’ll have to think about it.”

“Please do. And I’m serious—take care of *you*, Nate.”

“I will. Thanks for the pep talk.” I blew out a breath. “I’ll, um…I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. Take care.”

“You too.”

I set the phone on the nightstand. Up until recently, I’d had everything I ever wanted—my career and the two most amazing men in the world. But things had changed, and whether I liked it or not, something had to give. Preferably before my feeble attempts to bring Cam and Theo back together cost me my—and my bandmates’—career.

I rubbed my hand over my face and lay back across the hard hotel bed. Jill was right. It was time to step back and be selfish before I lost my sanity.

Even if that meant hurting Cam and Theo.

And myself.

Chapter Twenty-three

Cam

Few things made my stomach turn like seeing Nate's name or picture on a news site. For a long time, it had put me off reading the news online, but I'd gotten to where I could just roll my eyes and scroll past it.

Today, though, I couldn't ignore it.

Sitting on the couch, browsing the news out of boredom, I came across it, and couldn't look away.

Alien Emissary Singer Emotional & Evasive in Los Angeles

Shaky vocalist, 34, confronts reporters outside a Sherman Oaks hotel, refuses to answer questions about hiatus from US tour

My heart sped up. Though I knew it wasn't a good idea, I tapped on the link. The article was the usual bullshit—a reporter turning a celebrity's everyday activities into some statement or major thing—but the pictures were heartbreaking. Nate usually strolled past the paparazzi with his chin up, even giving them a friendly wave now and then.

This time—last night, judging by the captions—he looked ready to collapse in on himself. He kept his elbows close to his sides and his eyes down. A few of the photographers had been at just the right angle to still get a good look at his face, and it was painful to see. His features were tight, his jaw clenched—in one photo in particular, I was pretty sure he was on the verge of tears.

And there was a video. Against my better judgment, I hit play.

I struggled to watch the whole thing. The unsteadiness in Nate's voice, the way he was obviously struggling to keep himself together as he faced down the reporters and asked them what it was they wanted from him—it was excruciating.

And the bastards pursued him right to the front door of the hotel, where, God bless them, some security guards stepped in and kept them at bay. Just before Nate disappeared into the background, the video cut to a reporter standing in front of the hotel. Across the street, by the looks of it, so security must've chased them off the property.

Speaking earnestly into the microphone, the reporter went on to speculate about rumors of Nate secretly attending rehab for an unspecified drug problem, or of strife within the band, or within his alleged love triangle.

I knew, though. I knew exactly why he was in so much pain.

I am so sorry, Nate. We're putting you through—

My phone vibrated and startled the hell out of me.

Even more startling, the name on the text message—Nate.

I blinked. *Speak of the devil, and he will text you, apparently.*

The message made my stomach clench:

I need to see you both. Together.

I gulped. I wasn't sure how much more of each other Theo and I could stand right now.

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed again. This time it was Theo responding to Nate's text.

When/where?

I gulped. Nerves made my stomach clench, and dread prickled up the length of my spine. Whatever was on Nate's mind, it probably needed to be said in private. And Theo and I definitely didn't need to be together in public. Just in case shit went south.

Thankful they wouldn't be able to hear my uneasiness through a text message, I wrote back:

Do you both want to come by the house?

And then I waited.

* * * * *

Theo arrived first. Avoiding his gaze, I let him in like a guest even though his name was still on the mortgage.

We moved into the kitchen, which was where all these discussions seemed to happen these days. Maybe when Nate got here we'd sit down in the living room and get comfortable. Right. Like anything about this was going to be comfortable.

I drummed my nails on the island. "Do you want some coffee?"

Theo didn't look at me. "No, thanks."

Well, that was the end of my small talk. It wasn't a good idea for us to try to make idle conversation anyway. Too much potential for a benign comment to set us off, and I didn't want Nate showing up while we were in mid-screaming match.

Though as I surreptitiously watched Theo, I wondered if he was even capable of a screaming match tonight. His shoulders were slack. He had dark circles beneath his downturned eyes. I'd gotten so used to seeing him wound up and angry, when his shoulders were rigid and his neck muscles were steel-tight cables. I hated it when he was like that—I knew damn well he'd be stiff and sore if he wasn't already—but it was easier to stomach than this. Right now, it was a safe bet that Theo was the human equivalent of a car held together by duct tape and prayers—any minute now, a piece would snap off, and then the rest would fall apart.

I desperately wanted to ask if he was okay. That, however, was a guaranteed argument. An almost certain "I'd be fine if you weren't

such an asshole" or "you know damn well I'm not okay, and you know why." Or something. Somehow, I could just feel it—that simple, well-intentioned question would be much more incendiary than either of us could deal with right now.

The silence, however, was going to drive me insane.

I took a deep breath and spoke softly so I wouldn't startle him. "So, a friend referred me to a good Realtor." I fidgeted against the counter. "If we, uh, decide to…" The words stuck in my throat.

"Fine." It wasn't a defensive "fine," or a sarcastic one, or a passive aggressive one. More like a tired one. Like he just didn't have anything left.

"I won't sign anything without you. Just, you know, maybe bring someone in to get the ball rolling. But I won't leave you out of any decisions."

Eyes still down, he nodded.

Talk to me, Theo. Just say something.

He didn't, though, so I pulled my gaze away from him and busied myself making a cup of coffee I didn't need.

I miss you, Theo.

I want you to be okay.

What happened to us?

No point letting my mind wander down that road. It was done. We were here. Analyzing it to death wouldn't change anything.

I sipped my coffee. That was probably a mistake. I was already jittery and wired. Tired, yes, but I swore I was agitated down to the cellular level. Throwing some caffeine into the mix had to be a bad idea. It was something to do, though. The alternative was to pour myself a drink, and that would just give Theo something to grumble about.

The doorbell rang, and yet again, I had to let in someone who was supposed to live here.

Nate offered nothing. No glare. No smile. His expression was completely blank, though he seemed as exhausted as Theo looked and I felt. Like he hadn't slept at all since those damn paparazzi accosted him outside the hotel.

He followed me into the kitchen, where Theo waited. He leaned on the island, palms flat on the tiles.

"Do you, um…" I swallowed. "Do you want some coffee or something?"

He shook his head.

"Okay." I gestured toward the living room. "Should we sit?"

"Actually, no." Nate's voice was flat.

I blinked. "Oh. All right." I glanced at Theo. He was watching Nate, forehead creased with, I guessed, the same kind of confusion.

We all stood in silence with the kitchen island between us like some weird, tiled demilitarized zone. My stomach was too queasy for the coffee now, so I just held on to the cup for something to do with my hands.

Without speaking, Theo and I both watched Nate. I focused on our mutual boyfriend because he was the one who'd called this meeting, so he must've had something to say, but also because I couldn't look at Theo. Just being in the room with him hurt like hell.

Nate took a deep breath, and I held mine.

Here we go.

"So," he said quietly. "I'm just gonna cut to the chase. I need to go."

I nodded, though disappointment tugged hard at my gut. He wasn't even gone yet, and I already missed him.

"Yeah," I said. "You probably shouldn't cancel any more shows."

"It's…it's not just that." Nate squared his shoulders and met my eyes. "I need to *go*. I've already booked my flight." His Adam's apple bobbed. "And I'm not coming back."

My heart hit the floor. Theo's lips parted.

"What?" I whispered.

"I…" Nate shook his head. "I just can't do this. The thing is, I fell in love with both of you as individuals, but also as a couple. And being caught in between you is—" His voice hitched. He quickly cleared his throat, and stared at the tiles as he murmured, "It's hell."

"We both know that," I said. "We never imagined it would be easy."

"I know," Nate whispered. "I'm not holding it against you guys. I'm really not. But I can't stay in it either."

"So, that's it?" My pulse sped up. "You're just done?"

He nodded. "Being away from you was hard enough when you were together. And…I mean, I know what you guys are doing is a trial separation." He set his jaw. "But *this* isn't."

Nate…

I glanced at Theo.

A little help here?

But he said nothing.

Nate, however, wasn't finished.

"I still don't get what happened to you guys. I know there were problems." His eyes darted toward me. Then to Theo. For a split second, I was sure he was going to tip my hand and tell Theo about the panic attacks, but he just shook his head. "I don't see how any of those problems are the kiss of death, though. Maybe I've just been gone too long, and I'm looking at everything through rose-colored glasses, but you guys were…you were it, you know? You were that

couple everyone wanted to be. And I was lucky enough to be the guy you brought into your marriage. But now that you're done, I have to be too."

My mouth went dry. Blood pounded in my ears. *Shit. No.*

Nate rocked from his heels to the balls of his feet, not looking at either of us. "I guess…I mean, I can't go from what we were to suddenly being what amounts to a rebound for each of you. You're both hurting, you're both falling apart, and you both refuse to see how much you obviously still love each other."

"We do love each other," I said, refusing to look at Theo but still noticing his flinch from the corner of my eye. "We can't seem to make this work, though."

"Neither can I." Nate's voice wavered. "I tried because I didn't want to lose either of you. But I'm exhausted. Every time I'm with one of you, I feel guilty, like I'm hurting the other by being there. I won't choose between you, so I'm choosing to move on."

"Nate…we…" I struggled to find the words and tamp down the panic that was inching its way up my spine.

Theo, of course, said nothing.

Theo, for the love of God—he needs to know we both want him to stay!

But Theo didn't speak, and Nate didn't stop.

"I love you both. I always will." He pulled in a deep breath. "But I have to go. So, I'm coming by tomorrow to get my stuff. I've got a truck rented, and a storage unit, so…" He rolled his visibly tense shoulders. "Anyway, once that's done, I'll leave my key, and I'm heading back out on the road. After the tour, I'll find a place to live."

Theo was looking at him now, his features taut and his lips pulled into a thin, pale line, but he *still* said nothing.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and tried to talk my pulse back down to a safe level. No way was I losing it now. Not while Nate was slipping through our fingers.

"Maybe we all just need some time apart," I said, my voice shaky. "We—"

"No." Nate shook his head. "I've been apart from you guys. And you've been apart too, but all that's done is make things worse." He released a long breath, and some of the tension melted out of his shoulders. "So, that's what I needed to say. And I guess that's it. So I'm going to go."

"But…" I glanced at Theo—*seriously, say something!*—before turning to Nate again. "There's a lot of history here. We can't just throw this all away in a two-minute conversation." I gestured toward the living room. "Can we sit down and—"

"No." His tone was gentle but firm. Not nasty but not negotiable

either. “I think…I think we’ve all said everything that needs to be said.”

That’s not possible. You’re leaving. There has to be more.

He took a step away from the island. His eyes darted toward Theo. Then me. Then back to Theo. “Take care of yourselves. Okay?”

“Nate—”

He put up a hand. “I need to go. So that’s what I’m doing.”

He didn’t give either of us a chance to stop him before he turned and walked down the hall.

A few seconds later, the door closed behind him.

And Nate was gone.

Chapter Twenty-four

Theo

The click of the door seemed to echo like thunder through the hallway and the whole damned house. Nate may as well have slammed it behind him, shaking the whole place right off its foundation.

And now…I was alone with Cam.

Though I knew I'd regret it, I turned toward him. He was looking right at me, and as soon as our eyes met, his narrowed. I could already hear the *happy now?* even though he hadn't spoken.

"Well," he finally said. "That was productive."

"Can you blame him?" Why did it take so much energy just to speak? "He's as miserable as we are."

"Yeah." Bitterness oozed from his voice. "I told you he'd never go for this. Staying with each of us while we were breaking up."

I raised my eyebrows. "So, what were we supposed to do? Stay together and hope he never noticed how much we wanted to kill each other?"

"Maybe at least put some effort into fixing us," he growled. "Or just save him the trouble and cut him loose before he got to see us like this. But you thought—"

"Don't blame me for that." I gestured sharply at the hallway that had taken Nate to the front door. "Don't you fucking dare, Cam."

"Oh, I suppose it's *my* fault, then?" Cam asked. Before I could suggest that we'd both done our part, he added, "I didn't hear you doing a goddamned thing to keep him here."

"What the fuck did you want me to say? He'd made up his mind."

"Yeah. Just like you did."

I blinked. "Come again?"

"He's gone because we're splitting up, and that was *your* fucking decision, Theo. *You* left. Not me."

The verbal kick in the balls hurt, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it. Schooling my expression, I said, "Yeah? And it was just out of the goddamned blue, wasn't it? Just decided one day that I was bored and wanted to go live with my *fucking brother*." I narrowed my eyes and spoke through clenched teeth. "Not like I'd spent years getting tired of being browbeaten every minute of every —"

"You think I enjoyed that? You really think I liked—"

"Of course. It hurt you more than it hurt me. I'm sure."

Cam drew back, his features hardening. "Oh really? And maybe I

was fucking tired of having to drag every damned thing out of you."

I inclined my head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He huffed sharply and threw up his hands. "Seriously?" Ticking the points off on his fingers, he went on. "You're not interested in anything anymore. Just getting you to leave the house with me takes a fucking act of Congress. To be honest, I was beginning to wonder how long it would be before you started burning sick time just so you didn't have to go into work."

"So, what?" I swallowed. "I'm lazy now?"

He folded his arms tightly across his chest. "How many times did I hook you up with design jobs, and you flaked out on them?"

"Flaked out on them?" I snarled. "No. That wasn't what happened. Choosing not to take on a client is not the same as flaking out."

"No, but it does make it that much more aggravating when you're pissed off about making less money than you used to. You have a lucrative skill at the tip of your fingers, Theo. Fucking *use* it."

I ground my teeth so hard they ached. "If it were that easy, don't you think—"

"If it were easy, everyone would be doing it. You've got the talent and the skill. You just aren't doing anything with it."

No way in hell was I breaking down. Not here. Not now. I shoved that flurry of emotions beneath a fresh layer of anger and kept my eyes locked on his.

"I'd like to see you get anything creative done when you're too busy walking on fucking eggshells."

His eyebrows climbed, and he drew back a little. "So that part's my fault too? *You* quit doing something you love that also happens to make you money, and it's *my* fault?"

I exhaled. He didn't get it. And how the hell was I supposed to make him get it?

Especially since he apparently wasn't done. "Oh, and God forbid I ask for any help around the house."

I laughed bitterly. "Well, it wasn't like I could please you when I *did* help, so it didn't seem worth the hassle, you know? You were going to bitch at me no matter what."

"What?"

"Don't act stupid," I snapped. "I could do nothing—literally nothing—without you finding some fault. I made coffee in the morning but left the can out. I didn't put the milk on the right shelf. I put the trash bag in the can the wrong way, whatever the fuck that even means." I narrowed my eyes and gestured at the place where Nate had been standing. "So hey, why not blame me for that too? Everything else is my fucking fault, so—"

"You know what?" Cam shot back. "This is pointless. Why don't

you just get the fuck out of here?"

I was tempted to ask him who he thought he was, kicking me out of my own house. But this wasn't home. I was living elsewhere. And I was exhausted. The thought of trying to stand my ground and stake some sort of claim after I'd already conceded…just thinking about it stole whatever energy I had left.

"Fine," I whispered. Without another word or even another look, I followed the same path Nate had taken. Down the hall. Out the door. I didn't bother slamming it but didn't try to stop it either, and jumped when it banged shut behind me.

I didn't look back, though. I just kept on walking until I'd reached my car, then got in, backed out, and drove like hell.

* * * * *

My heart was still pounding when I pulled into Zach's driveway.

Zach and Taylor were out. Thank God. Where they'd gone and when they'd be back, I didn't care. All I needed was enough time to get to my room, shut the door, and I was home free. No questions. No judgmental looks from my brother. No sympathetic ones from his wife. No need to explain to Zach that he didn't have to worry about me dating Nate anymore, and that I'd start looking for a permanent place tomorrow since I definitely wasn't welcome in my own home.

I shuffled into the guest room and toed off my shoes. Then I lay back on my pillows, one arm behind my head, and—because I apparently wasn't feeling shitty enough—held up my phone with the other. With my heart in my throat, I opened the photo album.

The smartphone's ability to take amazing photos and store them by the hundred was a double-edged sword. Tonight, that ability meant my phone was currently *loaded* with images of a life I'd taken for granted. And because I loved torturing myself, I went through them. One by one, I swiped past photos of me and Cam. Me and Nate. The two of them. All three of us. A shot I'd taken of Nate onstage last summer. Cam and his five-year-old niece when we'd taken his sister's family to Disneyland that same summer.

Why am I doing this to myself?

I didn't have an answer. I also didn't stop. One after the other, I thumbed through the photos. Every single picture of Nate or Cam took my breath away. The ones of the three of us together, or the two of them, made my heart stop.

After seventeen years—nearly half my life and the vast majority of my adult years—it didn't seem possible Cam and I were over. In a weird way, it had seemed like once we made it past five or six years, or maybe ten years, it was all smooth sailing. Like there was a point of

no return, and after that, staying together was a foregone conclusion.

Of course I'd known that wasn't the case. Plenty of couples in my family and social circles had divorced after ten, twenty, even thirty years.

But being with Cam had been easy.

Right up until it wasn't.

I set my phone aside and wiped a hand over my face.

I didn't know which was worse—breaking up with Cam, or losing Nate as collateral damage. Or if it didn't matter which was worse because the sum total was that I was alone.

I'd never had a serious relationship before Cam. I'd never had one of those gut-wrenching breakups that seem to be a rite of passage in high school and college. This was my first, and it was my second, and it was hell.

I picked up the phone again and found the album of that trip we'd all taken to Maui. Most of them were playful selfies, but there was one I looked at all the time. I wasn't even sure if Nate or Cam had ever seen it. We were all out on a boat—the day we went out to Molokini, if I remembered right—and as the sun was going down, I'd taken a picture of the two of them, side by side against the railing. Cam's arm was around Nate's shoulders, and the lighting had been just perfect to pick out the gleam of his wedding ring and the sparkle in both their eyes as they looked at each other. In that moment, I was pretty sure they hadn't realized I was there, though I joined them a moment later. Right after I snapped this shot.

And there it was. The two of them, gazing at each other, so obviously in love. There hadn't been any jealousy then, and there wasn't now. After I'd taken the picture, I'd joined them, and they'd both looked at me just like they'd looked at each other.

But now Nate was leaving. Cam had kicked me out. That picture seemed surreal. Staring at it tonight, in the silence of my brother's guest room, I had to convince myself that, no, it wasn't Photoshopped. That moment had really happened. And somehow, everything had gone up in flames, and all that was left were pictures like this.

I tapped the picture, and the little trash can icon appeared. I tapped that too.

Are you sure you want to delete this photo?

My finger hovered over the screen for a long moment.

The photo had gone slightly dark, as if the phone were halfway to deleting it already, just waiting for that confirmation to erase the remaining pixels.

I couldn't do it.

I hit cancel and tossed the phone onto the nightstand. It kept going, sliding right off the edge and clunking to the floor.

Eh. Whatever. I didn't pick it up or even see if it was broken. So what if it was?

Join the club, phone.

Chapter Twenty-five

Nate

Less than forty-eight hours after I said good-bye to Cam and Theo, my plane touched down in Atlanta.

Moving out hadn't been the ordeal I'd anticipated. The guys had both been gone when I came to get my stuff, and I was still thankful for that. I wasn't ready to face either of them.

In a matter of hours, I'd packed up my belongings—I didn't have much besides the close and instruments I'd taken out on the road—and loaded them into a small U-Haul. Then I'd dropped my house key in the mailbox and left. After I'd turned in the truck, a cab picked me up at the rental place and took me to LAX, and now here I was.

And I didn't feel any better.

There was no relief in severing those last few ties with the men who'd been a part of my life for almost five years. Even the knowledge that I wasn't caught in the middle anymore, that I didn't have to feel torn between them, didn't help. I should've been licking my wounds and being thankful that it was over, but all I could do was grieve the most amazing love we'd had.

Had, Nate. It's over. It's probably been over for a long time.

Feeling like I hadn't slept in ages, I gathered my carry-on and got off the plane. I kept my head down, hoping my baseball cap concealed my face enough to let me slip through without being noticed.

On the way through the terminal, I paused to send a few texts and let Jill and Andy know I was on the ground. I also checked for messages. None. A good thing, I decided. No pleas from Cam or Theo to come back. They were letting me go without a fight. Which kind of hurt—did they not *want* me to stay?—but it was also the first thing that had given me any relief lately. It was over. It was done. No drama. No—

"Excuse me?"

I turned my head to see a woman who was probably in her early twenties. She cringed a little, approaching me cautiously. With a shy smile, she asked, "Are you Nate Keller?"

It took everything I had, but I smiled too. "Yeah. I am."

"Oh my God." She clapped both hands over her mouth, muffling a squeal that probably would've turned every head in the airport. "Can me and my friends get a picture? Please?"

"Sure," I said.

Her smile was so big and enthusiastic, it was almost enough to snap me out of my funk. Thank God for fans.

She beckoned to her two friends, and when they came over, I posed with them for a few shots and signed one woman's cell phone case.

Fortunately, the airport wasn't all that crowded today, so we didn't turn any heads. No one else approached. I was grateful for that—as much as my fans could pull me out of a funk like this, I wasn't sure I could handle being mobbed right then. Stand in front of twenty thousand people tonight? No problem. Interact face-to-face with twenty right now? All the while pretending I didn't want to just curl up on my bunk with a notebook and shut out the world? Not happening.

I was doubly thankful the press wasn't here. Sometimes they lurked around LAX, or they'd show up if someone tipped them off that the band was flying in somewhere, but there wasn't a camera or microphone in sight here in Atlanta. I was pretty sure that would've broken me. I hated the paparazzi anyway, and right now, camera lenses just brought to mind that day outside my hotel when they'd caught me in an excruciatingly raw moment.

I shuddered, rolling my shoulders to hide it. The fans thanked me for the autographs and photos, and they continued through the terminal. I pulled my hat down a little to shade my face and kept my eyes down as I followed the thin crowd past baggage claim and out to the taxi stand.

The wait for a taxi wasn't a long one for once. As I settled into the backseat with my bag resting halfway on my lap, I gave the driver the name of the venue.

The cab worked its way through the congested streets, which only got worse as we neared the venue. I had to talk my way past the venue's security gate, but after I'd persuaded them to call their manager, they were convinced I was who I said I was.

Not a moment too soon either—I'd promised to be back in time for tonight's show, and I'd *just* made it. When I stepped out of the cab, I had exactly one hour until sound check. The line outside was already around the block, and the doors didn't open for another two hours.

I'd be ready, though. In fact, I was more than ready. Just the subtle background noise of the waiting crowd and the usual flurry of activity backstage was enough to settle my stomach. More than ever, I needed to be Nate the singer. Nate the guy could huddle up behind a notebook later. But I needed to be *that* person tonight—the one bringing people to their feet and belting out songs with my friends.

First things first, I needed to drop off my luggage and get ready for the performance. I jogged toward the tour bus, my rolling suitcase bumping on the pavement behind me. When I was maybe twenty feet away, the bus door flew open and Jill burst out.

“Oh my God!” she squealed. “I am so glad to see you!” She rushed up to me and hugged me tight. “I think this crowd would’ve rioted if we’d canceled.”

“I told you—”

“Shh. Shh.” She put a finger to my lips and gave me a pointed look. “Your voice. Save it.”

Silently, I nodded.

“Hey, hey!” Charlie called out from the bus doorway. “Look who’s here!”

As he stepped down, the rest of my bandmates appeared behind him.

“Good to have you back, man.” Charlie clapped my shoulder. “Everything all right back home?”

Far from it.

“Yeah.” I forced a smile just like I had with those fans at the airport. “It’s all good.”

“Glad to hear it.” He and my other bandmates hugged me, and nobody gave me so much as a side-eye for leaving them in a lurch. Of course that just made me feel guiltier—without fail, these guys had my back, and I’d gone and ditched them for a week.

From now on, I promised myself, *this band comes first.*

God knew I owed them that much.

They were patient and forgiving, but the same couldn’t be said for our manager. It was only a matter of time before he caught up with me and gave me an earful, and that came right after sound check.

As I stepped backstage, Andy was waiting for me with a venomous glare. “You have any idea how much it cost us to cancel those shows?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “We’re good for the rest of the tour. Just had…” I hesitated. “A personal emergency to deal with. It—”

“Don’t care. And you need to save your voice for the stage.” He stabbed his finger at my chest. “Bottom line? I need you here with your band. Understood?”

I nodded.

“Good. Go get ready.”

I didn’t argue.

Getting back into the pre-performance routine felt good, but weird. Instrumentalists warmed up. Charlie stretched so he didn’t pull something in his arms or shoulders again. I didn’t speak. I never spoke before a show unless I absolutely had to. If I needed to communicate with someone, I wrote it down or typed it out on my phone.

This was the normal routine, and getting back to it meant I was returning to my normal life.

Except Cam and Theo’s absence seemed to be everywhere. It stuck to everything like cigarette smoke stuck to clothes and furniture. They

were never present during this routine, but it suddenly felt like they'd always been here. Like a band member who'd been there since day one and then quit.

I hadn't been this nervous since the first time we'd played a festival. When I'd peeked out from backstage and realized we were playing for thousands of people instead of the five-hundred-if-we're-lucky crowds we were used to.

The opening act closed their set, and our roadies hurried out to change up the stage. I glanced out at the crowd, and my heart skipped. Jesus. The venue was huge and the show was sold out, and the place thrummed with the excitement of twenty thousand people. Rumor had it there were reporters outside waiting to break the news that Alien Emissary had canceled again, or that we'd put on a half-assed show, or whatever sensational outcome they could report.

Not a chance. I took a few deep breaths and rolled some tension out of my shoulders. This was what I *did*. Singing was what I was good at. It had only been a week since I'd been onstage, so I'd be fine.

Yeah. I *would* be fine. I'd been all right before I met Cam and Theo, and I'd be all right with them in my past. And hell, if I could sing through a nasty chest infection with a throat so sore I could barely talk, then I could sure as hell bring down the house while I was secretly reeling from the end of my relationship. I would be fucking fine.

The roadies cleared out. The lights went down. The instrumentalists took their places in the darkness, and launched into the intro to our opening number.

You've got this, Nate. You've totally got this.

Damn right.

When it was my cue, I jogged out onstage to join the rest of the band.

And we fucking killed it.

***

After everyone had showered, eaten, and were relaxing for the night, Jill joined me on my bunk. As I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, something in my chest seemed to settle. Everything had been so fraught back in LA. I wasn't used to the idea of being around Cam and Theo without winding up in bed, or at least cuddling up on the couch, and I hadn't realized till now how much I'd been needing physical contact with someone.

She looked up at me. "So how did it go?"

I didn't even have to ask what she was referring to. "Not very well. But it's done." I exhaled, my chest aching. "I'm done. With

them.”

She cuddled a little closer. “I’m sorry. You want to talk about it?”

I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head. “I’d rather not.”

“Okay.”

We let the comfortable silence set in. She perused social media on her phone, answering some tweets from friends, and I just basked in the feeling of being next to someone who didn’t expect anything more than body heat from me. No eggshells to walk on. No feeling like strings were attached to anything. Just that calm feeling of my world settling.

There was still plenty on my mind, though. Like the worst was over, and there was nothing left to do but sort it all out, process it, and figure out how to move on.

At least for that, I had a nearly foolproof method.

So with Jill resting against me, I pulled my notebook out from beside the mattress. Propped it up on my knee.

And wrote.

Chapter Twenty-six

Cam

A week or so after everything blew up, I hit my breaking point.

Driving down the I-5, I reminded myself over and over that holding the wheel this tight would only tire out my hands. I was on my way to massage a client. I couldn't afford to have sore, fatigued hands when I arrived at her house.

But I couldn't relax. I hadn't been able to since the night both of the men in my life walked out of the house. I wasn't sleeping. I barely ate. I was constantly in a state of jittery near-panic, as if I were powerlessly watching a train wreck in progress with no way to intervene. Several of my clients had commented that it looked like I was the one who needed a massage, and more and more, I was inclined to agree.

It didn't make sense, though. Everything should've been settling. It was over, for God's sake, so why did it all feel worse? Nate had made his decision. I'd made mine and kicked Theo out. Why did everything seem more chaotic now? More up in the air?

Home didn't feel like home anymore. It was just an empty battle zone that was too painfully quiet now, so I did everything I could to avoid going home. I took on more clients than my arms and shoulders could handle. I stayed at the clinic until the very last walk-in was gone. I worked myself into the ground because it was easier than being in a place full of evidence of the man who was gone from my life and the one who wasn't gone enough. I couldn't even listen to the radio in the car because one of Nate's singles invariably came on. My own playlists didn't help because I could hear him singing along to them in that smooth, beautiful voice.

I gripped the wheel tighter and pulled in a long breath through clenched teeth. I was losing my mind, wasn't I? Probably. Here I was, flying down the I-5 at eighty miles an hour with a few thousand other cars, and I couldn't shake this panicky jitteriness. My mind was everywhere. I hadn't heard from Nate or Theo. It wasn't a surprise, but it was stressing me out. Was Nate doing okay? Was Theo going to make a move, or was I supposed to? What the hell happened now?

Divorce. That was what happened now. One of us had to call checkmate, file the paperwork, and be done with it. Then we'd have to sell the house and divide our assets and face each other with lawyers by our sides and—

Tires squealed and a horn blared.

I swerved just before a Mercedes and I would've swapped paint.

Panic surged through my veins, and it took a couple of heartbeats too long to get my car under control, but thank God, I did. Safely between the white lines, I fought to catch my breath. And calm down. And… *shit. What is wrong with me?*

Shaking badly, I changed lanes, then slowed down. I pulled over, shifted into park, and held the wheel in a two-handed death grip as I willed my heart to slow down.

Way to go, Haines. Because an LA freeway is totally the place to lose your mind.

I couldn't quite remember what had just happened. Had I drifted into another lane? Changed lanes on autopilot without looking? Anything was possible. I'd been so out of it, it was a wonder I was going the right direction.

My concentration was shot. Regardless of what my pride had to say about it, I had to accept that I was in no shape to work on a client today. And even if I could find a way to do that, I had no business driving.

I took out my phone and speed-dialed today's client, a lovely retired actress named Anna.

"Hi, Cam!" she said.

"Hi, Anna." I forced my voice to sound pleasant and professional. "Listen, uh, I'm sorry for the short notice, but I'm going to have to cancel on you this afternoon."

"Oh. Is everything okay?"

No. Not even close.

"I…just have some things I need to deal with. But I'll be there on Thursday, and that session's on the house."

"Don't worry about that. You just take care of yourself, okay?"

I winced—I always felt guilty when I had to cancel on someone, and it was even worse when they were genuinely nice and caring like Anna. "Thanks. I'll do that. See you on Thursday."

"See you on Thursday, sweetie."

After we'd hung up, I dropped my phone on the other seat and took a few more deep breaths. Okay. Off the hook for the afternoon. Maybe now I could get off this road and out of this car and find some way to get my shit together before I had another damn attack.

Once I was sure I could concentrate on driving and nothing else—at least long enough to get home—I put on my blinker and pulled back into traffic.

The whole way, I refused to let any thoughts creep into my mind that weren't directly related to driving. There were no more near misses this time, and I had never been so relieved to pull into my own driveway.

The second I walked in through the front door, though, it all came

crashing back down. My mind reeled as I shakily turned the dead bolt, and I shuffled like a damn zombie into the kitchen to hang up my keys, put my wallet in its place, and maybe…maybe make a cup of coffee? Something? Didn't I have a routine when I came home? What happened to my routine?

Knees shaking, I halted at the kitchen island. I flattened my palms on the tile counter, letting the coolness hold my attention for a moment. I focused on breathing. Slowly. Deeply. As long as I was breathing, I was okay. Right? I hadn't wrecked the car. I'd made it home. The only thing I needed to do right now was calm down.

Calm down? How?

I couldn't take this shit anymore. Everything had been up in the air for so long, I swore I could physically feel myself going gray. Just thinking about everything—Theo, Nate, the house, the future—sent my pulse soaring. I was useless to my clients. Too unfocused to be out on the road. I was a goddamned wreck, and that wasn't going to change until all this shit was done, over with, and behind me. Until things had finally calmed the fuck down. Which they apparently had no intention of doing.

Closing my eyes, I took in a long breath, held it, then slowly released it.

It was time to do something. Despite my hopes and my best efforts, this thing obviously wasn't going to get any better, so I needed to start putting it to bed. Turn Nate's bedroom into something else. Clear Theo's desk and file cabinets out of the office we'd shared. Replace his pillow on our bed because…fuck, I didn't even know why. Some sort of petty need to evict him? A way to grab on to one of the remaining shreds of my sanity? Whatever. Suddenly it seemed like an important thing to do. Suddenly the only thing that seemed important was exorcising both of them from this house.

And while I was at it, I wanted out of here too. Without a second thought, I pulled the Realtor's card out of my wallet and gave her a call. She didn't answer, so I left her a message, and that was enough to put my mind somewhat at ease. It would take time—we'd have to do a consultation, discuss options, stage the house, list the house. Theo would have to be involved in the process. But I'd made contact and gotten the ball rolling. It was a start.

I put the phone down and took a few more breaths. Making that call had stirred up some fresh anxiety, but I reminded myself over and over that it would be okay in the end.

Hell, while I was at it, maybe it was time to take care of a few other stressful, heartbreaking parts of this excruciating process.

Heart still thumping and stomach still sick, I grabbed my keys and went out to the car. Now that I was on a mission—now that there was

a solution in sight that would start to put everything right—I was no longer afraid I'd have another breakdown. There were steps, and a process, and answers, and I could calmly go through those motions if it meant hope that everything would be better now.

I hesitated after I'd started the engine. This was the right thing. This was what needed to be done. It wasn't going to be pleasant, and every step I took felt like an admission of defeat, of failure, but at the same time, like I was reclaiming control. No one was going to put my life back on the rails except for me, and this was what needed to be done.

So I took a deep breath, put the address for the county courthouse into my GPS, and pulled out of the driveway.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Theo

The papers were in a manila envelope on top of the drawing pad I hadn't touched in ages.

From across the room, sitting back on the bed in my brother's guest room, I stared at the envelope. I didn't need to pull out the papers. I'd read them over enough times, they were as good as memorized.

Filed by Cameron Michael Haines.

Petition for dissolution of marriage.

Irreconcilable differences.

A bunch of enormous words that spelled it out, and yet seemed to dance around the truth. Couldn't the petition have just said "*I'm fucking leaving you*"?

Well, whatever. It was over. No more grasping for a solution. No more trying to push through and make our marriage work. The white flag was raised—written with legalese, signed by the man who'd said forever, stuffed into a manila envelope, and hand-delivered to me on my way out of the office.

Seventeen years, and we'd wound up here.

Seventeen years, a house, a million memories, a shared boyfriend, and it all came down to signatures, lawyers, and a judge. The sooner I signed it, the sooner this would all be over.

I exhaled as I kept staring at the envelope. It was a little bent, the edges crinkled from being rolled up in my sweaty hand as I'd numbly walked the rest of the way to my car. It wasn't like it was that big of a shock—after that last blowout with Nate and Cam, divorce was pretty much inevitable—and somehow it had still fallen out of the clear blue sky.

On one hand, I was devastated. On the other, I was relieved he'd dropped the hammer and filed the paperwork. The morning after he'd kicked me out, I'd gone to the courthouse myself, but couldn't go through with it. Two days later, I'd made up my mind to go again but let myself think for too long about exactly what I'd have to do, and what it would mean, and I couldn't even get out to my car to make the drive.

Resentment burned in my chest. In my mind, I saw him casually filling out the paperwork, then strolling out of the courthouse with his hands in his pockets and a spring in his step. Of course I knew him better than that. He was an asshole, but he was no monster, and that ordeal had probably been hell for him. Still, I hated him for having

the energy and the focus to do what I'd failed to. I *despised* him for being strong enough.

And I didn't know what the fuck to do now. My creativity was MIA. My job was hell. My boyfriend was gone. My husband was leaving.

Was there anything left?

Nothing that requires me to be sober.

That was enough to get me up and on my feet. I went into the kitchen. Zach didn't keep beer in the house, but there was some hard liquor in the cabinet in the dining room.

Oh yes, I thought as I opened up the glass doors. *There is* more *than enough in here to make tonight easier.*

Tequila was asking for an even more miserable evening. Rum reminded me too much of drinking ourselves stupid and horny in Hawaii. Vodka needed a mixer, and I didn't have enough brain cells left to figure out what.

Whiskey, though. Whiskey would do.

I took out the bottle, closed the liquor cabinet, and went into the kitchen. There, I filled a glass partway with ice. I wasn't even sure why. What did I care if it was cold? But it was something to do, so whatever.

I started to unscrew the bottle cap but hesitated. Would Zach be upset if I drank some of his booze? Well, it wasn't like it was a finely aged bottle of limited edition cognac or something. Every gas station in town had this shit by the gallon. Tomorrow, I'd go buy him more. I wasn't rolling in money, but I had enough left to buy a bottle to replace this one. Hell, I'd buy him two. Maybe a third one for myself. Wasn't like I was using the money for anything else.

Aside from an attorney, finding a new place, moving into that new place, paying rent, paying bills, putting gas in my tank to go to the job I hated so I could keep paying bills on a place in whatever shitty neighborhood I could afford without Cam's income and—

I unscrewed the cap.

After a single, I still felt like shit. After a double, I still hurt.

So I kept drinking until I didn't.

* * * * *

Someone was tugging at my shoulder.

"Theo?" My sister-in-law's voice thumped against my temples. "Honey, can you hear me?"

I forced my eyes open, but vicious bright light stabbed my skull. Groaning, I covered my face with my hand. "Fuck…"

"Oh thank God."

Why was I lying on something cold? And hard?

And why did she sound like she was above me?

Gingerly, I lowered my hand. My eyes still hurt and the light was still brutal, but gradually, I focused enough to make out the toilet beside me and the cabinet that seemed to tower above me.

Taylor crouched next to me, her hand on my shoulder. “Can you sit up?”

Do I have to?

With her help, though, I did. Sitting up made the nausea worse. I leaned against the bathtub, the porcelain edge pleasantly cool through my shirt. I bent my knees, pressed my elbows against them, and rubbed my head. My mouth tasted awful, and my throat burned. I didn’t remember getting sick, but I also didn’t remember coming into the bathroom, never mind passing out on the floor.

The water in the toilet bowl was clear. Either I’d had the presence of mind to flush it, or she’d done it, but…good. Otherwise I’d have probably found some more to add to it.

She put the toilet lid down and sat on it, resting a hand on my shoulder again. “How do you feel?” She spoke softly, as if she knew how much my head hurt.

I groaned.

“How much did you have to drink last night?”

Not enough.

“I have no idea.” I swallowed, wincing at the taste. “What time is it?”

“Probably time for you to go to the ER.”

My head snapped up, and that was a mistake. I lowered it again, groaning as I cradled my throbbing skull in my hands. “I’m fine. Just…hungover.”

“You’re *white*, sweetie. Like, scary white. And God knows how long you’ve been passed out in here.” She touched my arm. “I want to make sure you don’t have alcohol poisoning.”

“I’m fine.” *Right?* “It’s a hangover. I’ll be fine.”

She pursed her lips. “Let’s get some coffee in you at least.”

Coffee sounded better than sprawling on the bathroom floor, so I nodded slowly. Even that hurt—God, I was a wreck.

With her help, I got to my feet. Then she leaned past me and picked up the whiskey bottle, which I hadn’t even realized was there. Still upright too. Good. Didn’t need anyone screaming at me for booze spilled on the linoleum.

Except the only one who’d lose his shit over that isn’t here. Thank God.

Taylor held up the bottle and peered at it. “Was this…” She blinked. “Zach just bought this. Did you drink *all* of that?”

I forced my eyes to focus. The liquid barely made it past the

bottom of the label. I was pretty sure it had been a new bottle when I'd opened it. I didn't remember drinking that much, but apparently I'd kept going long after my brain had stopped recording. Or, judging by the smell of my shirt, I'd worn at least some of it.

"I guess," I muttered. "No one else here, so…"

"Oh my God." She slammed the bottle down so hard on the bathroom counter it sounded like gunfire, and pain ricocheted through my skull. "Theo, were you trying to kill yourself?"

She couldn't have made me jump more if she'd actually hauled off and slapped me.

Were you trying to kill yourself?

Were *you?*

My tongue stuck to the roof of my parched mouth. I remembered very little of last night, but I remembered enough that I couldn't look her in the eye and tell her I *wasn't* trying to kill myself.

"Jesus." She left the bottle on the bathroom counter and led me into the kitchen. I sat at the table, and neither of us spoke while she made us coffee. I managed to thank her after she'd set a cup down in front of me, but the silence lingered after that until we were both on our second cup.

"Honey." Taylor wrapped her hands around her cup. "You need help. This is out of control."

"What I need is Cam," I whispered. "And Nate. I feel like everything is…" I raked a trembling hand through my hair. "Everything that was good in my life is gone. My husband. My boyfriend. I've never been able to find a job that holds a candle to the one I had before, and for some fucking reason, I can't function enough to do my art. I'm…completely lost."

She took my hands in both of hers and looked me right in the eye. "You're not lost. You're depressed. You need help."

"Of course I'm depressed. My marriage just fell apart, and—"

"No. I think you were depressed before. The last few years, you've been…different."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean?"

She held my gaze, her brow pinched with what seemed like genuine concern. "You just haven't been yourself. You used to smile all the time. And you were always excited about something. An art piece you were working on, or…" Her lips pulled tight. "Have you even done any art recently?"

I flinched. "Not much."

"Define 'not much.'"

Releasing a breath, I let my shoulders sag. "None."

"Why not?"

"Because there's nothing there."

"What do you mean, nothing there?"

I swept my tongue across my lips. "I mean, I look at the screen, or the canvas, and there's just…nothing. Or one of my freelance clients will give me specs for a logo or something, and even though I understand the specs…nothing happens."

"Like the creativity is all gone?"

Throat aching, I nodded. I was too exhausted to break down, but it hurt like hell to acknowledge that even my art—the thing that had kept me sane through my closeted years and my stressful investment banking years—had slipped away. "It's gone."

"Theo. Honey." She squeezed my hands. "I need you to answer me honestly."

"About?"

Taylor locked eyes with me. "Why were you drinking last night?"

Shame tugged at my gut. I'd never been much of a drinker. Definitely not like that. Shaking my head, I sighed. "I felt like shit. Just wanted to check out for a while, I guess."

"How much did you plan to drink when you started?"

That…was a good question.

"It doesn't matter right now," she said. "Listen, I want to take you to the hospital. Make sure you didn't mess yourself up drinking like that."

I didn't move. "And the minute they start asking me why I drank that much, they're going to want to keep me for a psych eval."

Her expression didn't change. "Then maybe that's what you need."

"I'm not crazy."

"No, but I'm not convinced I can turn my back on you and be sure you won't hurt yourself."

And I didn't have enough fight left in me to tell her she was blowing it out of proportion. Especially since I couldn't tell myself she was wrong. She wasn't, was she? I really was on that knife's edge where rational and irrational thought sounded almost the same, and quite possibly the only thing stopping me from actually killing myself was the energy required to go through with it.

Oh my God. What happened to me?

I covered my eyes with a shaking hand. "I'm a fucking mess."

"Yes, you are, but there are people who can help you."

Why? Wouldn't it be easier to just lie down and let this thing do what it's going to do? I could fight through this, come out the other end, and…what? There's nothing left.

Oh shit. I really am a wreck.

"Theo." She squeezed my arm.

I lowered my hand and met her eyes. Hers were filled with sympathy and concern. No judgment. I'd passed out on her bathroom

floor after killing way too much of a bottle of whiskey, and instead of berating me, she wanted to help.

"You're right," I whispered. "I need help."

Taylor nodded. "Let's start with getting you to the ER."

"Okay."

She let go of my arm and picked up her purse off the counter. "I'll drive."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Nate

Stepping off the stage as the crowd roared behind me, I pushed out a breath and muttered "thank God" into the noise. I took off my earpiece, handed my microphone off to one of the techs, and downed two thirds of a bottle of water. The rest of it, I poured over my head and neck to cool myself off.

My throat was raw, so I put a cough drop in my mouth to try to soothe it. I'd been going through those little bastards like candy for the past twenty-four hours. At least my voice had held out. There'd been a few times today—not to mention during the show—where I'd wondered.

The other day, I'd flown into Atlanta and made it to the venue just in time for sound check, and after that, I fully intended to be right there with the band as we moved from town to town. I'd thrown myself into that first show, refusing to give the tabloids a chance to speculate that I wasn't with it or that I was spiraling downward.

That turned out to be a mistake. The next night, I'd tried to do the same, and discovered five minutes into the set that the previous show had taken more out of me than I'd realized. I still held it together, and we made it through without giving the fans a reason to suspect that something was wrong, but I'd collapsed in my bunk afterward and slept for a solid ten hours.

Now I was exhausted, my voice was strained, and I had back to back to back shows for the next week and a half. As I toweled off my face and hair backstage, I was pretty sure vocal rest was in my future for at least the next couple of days. Fine. Didn't really have much to say to anyone anyway.

"Hey, Keller." Andy's voice made my neck prickle. As I lowered the towel, he eyed me, resting his elbow on a stack of cases. "You doing all right?"

I nodded. "I'm good."

"Good." He inclined his head. "How about tomorrow night, you bring your A game, yeah?"

I gritted my teeth. He didn't care why my A game was MIA tonight, and he hated excuses, so I just nodded again. "Will do."

"Damn right you will," he growled. "Because you've still got a long tour ahead of you, and if word gets out that you're half-assing shows, those ticket sales are going to drop. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He smiled thinly, that expression that meant he didn't buy it, but

he was going to let me prove it. Or rather, let me fall on my face. He was very much the "give 'em enough rope to hang themselves" type of guy. He thought the best way to get through to someone was when they were still picking themselves up after they'd tripped over their own dick.

That wasn't what I needed. This wasn't laziness or my ego getting in the way, and I *would* pull myself together before the next show. I would *not* blow this tour. The band, the tour, the record deal—this was all I had left, and I wasn't letting anyone down, myself included.

"Anyway." Andy pushed himself off the stack of cases and clapped my shoulder so hard, I nearly choked on my cough drop. "Go see your fans. They're probably already lining up."

I grunted an affirmative, keeping the cough drop firmly between my teeth so it wouldn't try to slip down my throat again. As he walked off, I glared at his back and crunched hard on the lozenge, the pieces shattering across my tongue.

"What a dick." Jill's voice startled me. When I turned around, she shook her head, arms folded across her chest, her sweaty makeup-smeared face taut with a vicious scowl. "He needs to get off your back."

"Eh." I shrugged and swallowed a few sharp pieces of the cough drop. "I do need to get my—"

"You sounded *fine* tonight. And the fans agreed." She rolled her eyes. "He's just pissed off because you disappeared, and he's trying to find a reason to give you shit."

I massaged my stiff neck. "He's right, though. I'm not quite all there yet."

"Of course you're not. But you're getting out there and performing when any of us would be curled up under the stage or something."

"She's right," Charlie cut in. I turned to see him rubbing his upper arm gingerly. "I wasn't sure how you'd be when you came back, but you've been on point. Just ignore Andy."

Chris appeared behind him. "Yeah. Don't worry about his bullshit."

I exhaled, grateful for my band's support. And I should've have been surprised. They'd been my closest friends since junior high. "Thanks. And, um, I'm sorry I bailed on you guys for a few days."

"No, man." Chris shook his head. "You had shit to deal with. Family comes first, you know?"

Family. Ouch.

"Well." I muffled a cough. "It's taken care of. I'm all yours for the rest of the tour."

"We know, dude," Charlie said. "We've got your back. Don't worry about it."

With some effort, I managed a smile. “Thanks, guys. We should, um”—I gestured at the door—“get outside before people get mad.”

We went out to see the fans, sign autographs, and pose for pictures. Fans never minded when we were sweaty after a show. Most of them were too, especially those who’d been in the mosh pits up front. It was almost like there was some kind of camaraderie in being sweaty, dirty, and disheveled after a show, and seeing the band in the same state. I could relate—I had a few photos lying around of me with various bands I’d met over the years after concerts.

I envied my fans. Most of them were much more confident and articulate with us than I’d ever been with other musicians. They looked us in the eye, talked to us, asked questions. Some were a bit forward and even aggressive—especially if they were drunk, horny, or both—but most were friendly, if a bit starstruck. When a particularly shy fan came along, we all—especially Chris and me—made a point of taking a little extra time with them. God knew we’d been there.

After a group of teenage girls left, clutching phones and signed posters to their chests, I turned to the next fan in line.

He was cute, and he didn’t just meet my gaze—he held it. He was definitely attractive, especially with all that ink and that smeared eyeliner.

I’m a free agent now.

Maybe tonight was my chance to take advantage of the rockstar status that my bandmates were enjoying so much. We’d reached that level where groupies existed and sex was easy to come by. I’d never really tasted that because I’d been with Cam and Theo since before the band was signed.

I held the eyelinered guy’s gaze. Why did that look remind me of the way Theo would look at me when he was feeling feisty? Or how Cam would lock eyes with me just before a filthy grin would raise the corners of his mouth and my pulse?

Oh yeah. I knew what he wanted.

And yeah. I could hook up with him tonight. And tomorrow, social media would be alive with the usual rumors about Nate Keller being gay, but also about being a lazy, unenthusiastic disappointment in the sack. Because that was exactly what I’d be tonight.

I forced a smile, signed the photo he was holding, and took a picture with him. And yeah, that arm around my waist was suggestive—keeping me close to him, fingers pressing in just enough for me and no one else to notice.

When he let me go, he met my gaze once more, and the offer was clear as day in his eyes, especially as his eyebrows flicked up.

I smiled again and handed back the phone we’d used to take a selfie. “Thanks for coming.”

"Yeah, thanks for a good show." His fingers brushed mine as he took the phone, but I pretended not to notice. He looked a little disappointed but didn't say anything and walked on with his friends. I shifted my attention to the next group of fans and tried not to be disappointed that I'd passed on his offer. I didn't have the energy for sex tonight, but goddamn, I had the *need* for it.

This must've been what Theo felt like that night when we couldn't finish.

I winced but refused to let anyone see it. For all intents and purposes, I was still onstage. Still performing for my fans—just up close and personal now. So I couldn't let the mask slip and show what was going on behind the scenes.

One fan at a time, I made it through the crowd, and after the last few fans were heading out to the parking lot, the band and I returned to where our bus was parked.

This was one of those venues that was equipped with decent showers, so I took full advantage. We'd played in plenty of shitty places over the years, and it was a recent enough memory that I didn't dare complain about water temperature or pressure. The fact that there *was* a shower—and the water wasn't some shade of green, gray, or brown—meant I had absolutely no leg to stand on to bitch.

I stood under the rushing hot water and let it run through my hair and down my back. The steam helped my throat, and the water pressure beat out some of the fatigue and stiffness in my shoulders. What I needed more than anything right now was sleep. My body ached all over, and I didn't dare let myself think about what Cam's magic hands would've been able to do about that.

Wasn't there a time when I'd leave after a show and go have a threesome with Cam and Theo? And wasn't that time, like, not that long ago?

I sighed, rubbing my neck. Maybe I was coming down with something. Or just re-adapting to life on the road. Or hell, maybe I'd aged twenty years in the week I'd spent in Los Angeles. God knew I felt the part.

This was just part of the grieving process. I'd ended our relationship after damn near half a decade together. Being the right thing to do didn't change that it was a painful thing to do. It would take time. I'd move on. I'd feel like myself again. I'd even take someone up on an offer of sex eventually.

Just not tonight.

After my shower, I dragged myself back to the bus just as Jill and the others were coming out.

"Hey," she said. "We're going to go hunt down some horribly unhealthy food." She tilted her head. "You want to come?"

Just the thought of going anywhere—especially anywhere there might be people—drained what little energy I had left. I shook my head. “I’m just gonna stay behind.”

“You okay?”

I nodded. “Processing things. But I’ll be fine.”

Jill held my gaze, and I hoped like hell she bought it this time. Or at least read between the lines and understood that I didn’t want to talk and did want to be alone. Even her company was too much tonight, and I didn’t know how to say that without sounding like an asshole.

“Okay, hon.” She stepped closer and hugged me gently. “Take it easy tonight, all right?”

“I will.” *I think that’s about all I* can *do right now.*

After everyone left, I dropped onto the couch and pulled out my phone. Big shock—no messages. No missed calls.

My heart sank. I wasn’t surprised, but…it still sucked. If there was one thing that would take some serious getting used to, it was looking at my phone after a show and seeing nothing from Cam or Theo.

I hoped they were both all right. Or would be. I knew damn well they weren’t all right at the moment.

Theo was probably a fucking wreck. I just hoped he had some support besides that asshole brother of his. For as long as I’d known them, Cam had been the rock. Theo was no weakling, but he hadn’t been coping as well with anything in a long time. The effect was extra dramatic when I went for weeks between visits, and I could see how much he’d been worn down from one visit to the next. After he and Cam had split, he’d just gotten worse.

And now he had to cope without me and without Cam.

My gut tightened. Maybe I should call him. See how he was holding up. Yeah, I needed to call it quits with them. Yeah, I needed to walk away. But I still cared about both of them. Was it crossing a line to check in and see if he was okay? Would it make things worse if he heard from me?

I pressed my fingers into the bridge of my nose. What *was* the protocol after something like this? If I looked on the internet, would I find some sort of comprehensive instruction manual detailing what a guy was supposed to do when he was perpetually on the road and his two ex-boyfriends were in the middle of a nasty divorce and he just wanted to make sure they were okay?

Maybe I’d give them—and myself—some time, and try to make some cautious contact. For now, I’d just try to deal with things on my end.

At least the world hadn’t ended. Somehow I’d been convinced it would, but I was still alive. My band still had my back on- and

offstage. Our fans were still coming to the shows.

I'll be okay. Not sure when, but I'll be okay.

For now, I needed to sleep, so I stripped down to my shorts and climbed into my bunk. Tired as I was, I fully expected to crash and burn the minute I laid down.

Not so much.

Hands laced behind my head, I stared up at the bunk above mine. Sleep didn't come. Thoughts did. Too many thoughts to sort through *or* ignore.

I'd never been on tour without Cam and Theo at home. I'd performed a million times before they came into my life, but Alien Emissary's first tour had been after the three of us became a triad. When this tour ended, I wouldn't be going home to them, and I still wasn't sure what I felt about that.

Whatever I felt, it was what it was. I'd done everything I could think to do. Giving up and walking away hadn't been easy, but it was the right thing. It was the best thing I could do. It was also the first time I'd been single in almost five years, and I was letting go of two men, not one.

I'd be okay, though. I'd pour as much of it as I could handle into my lyrics, and I'd go on touring and writing and singing, living the dream I'd had since I was a kid. Eventually, I'd put myself out there again and date—maybe even hook up with an anonymous guy from time to time—but not yet.

Cam and Theo would be okay too. How, I didn't know. Would they get help? Would they go on alone? Find new people?

I had no idea, and no control over it. All I could do was wish them both the best, and hope that, when the dust settled and they moved on with their new separate lives, Cam and Theo would be happy again.

Meanwhile, I had shows to perform, songs to write, music to play, fans to please.

I had a life to live, and no matter how much it hurt, that life was going on.

Without Cam.

Without Theo.

Life was going on.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Cam

I hadn't heard from Nate since he'd left. That wasn't surprising. Painful, but…expected.

I hadn't heard a word from Theo since I'd had him served four days ago. I'd received confirmation that he'd been served, so that part was done, but nothing after that. Which probably meant he was consulting with an attorney.

Fine. Good. Now we could move forward. Things would still be up in the air for a while, but I felt better just knowing that the wheels were turning instead of spinning uselessly. I had a meeting with the Realtor set up for tomorrow. At least then I could get an idea of what the process would entail, what needed to be done before we listed the house, and a ballpark estimate for an asking price. Progress. Forward motion. At this point, every little bit helped.

I wasn't on an even keel yet—probably wouldn't be for a while—but I felt better today. Good enough to see my clients. Nobody seemed to notice anything was wrong. When I went by the clinic to pick up my pay stub and another bottle of massage oil, my coworkers chatted with me like everything was normal. I'd even been able to listen to the radio in the car, though I kept it to an oldies station so I wouldn't be smacked by an Alien Emissary song.

By the time I walked into the house that evening, I was exhausted, but better than I'd been recently. Still hurting, still struggling to accept that Nate was really gone, but it was an improvement. A small step in the right direction.

I went upstairs, took out my contacts, and put on my glasses. Back down in the kitchen, I searched through the fridge and rifled through some delivery menus, but nothing sounded good. Going out and eating alone—that sounded even worse.

Weren't there still some frozen dinners in the garage freezer? It wasn't great, but it was food. And it was easy. So I—

The doorbell rang.

I jumped. Then I groaned.

Now what?

I was seriously tempted to not answer it. It was probably some kids selling stuff for school. Was it Girl Scout cookie season again? Hell, I couldn't remember.

Cursing softly, I trudged down the hall to the front door, turned the dead bolt, and opened it.

And my heart stopped.

“Theo?” My lungs turned to lead. “What…what’re you doing here?”

His Adam’s apple jumped. In a voice so soft I barely heard him at all, he said, “Can we talk?”

I glanced down, and my stomach clenched when I realized he had the divorce papers in his hand. “There’s nothing left to talk about.”

“There is. There’s a lot.”

No. I was starting to move on. This is over. I need you to stay gone so I can breathe.

“Theo, I don’t—”

“Can you just hear me out?” he begged. “Please. I need to talk to you, and afterward, I’ll go. I promise.”

I wanted this to be over. I needed him to be gone so I could put it all behind me and move forward, but…the desperation in his eyes stopped me dead. His cheeks were gaunt. His shoulders were down. I caught myself wondering how he was even holding himself up.

Despite every alarm bell in my head telling me to shut the door and turn the dead bolt, I broke eye contact, stood aside, and gestured for him to come in. In silence, we walked into the kitchen, the same place where we’d ripped the last of our marriage and our relationship with Nate to shreds.

He set the papers on the counter. They were curled a bit, like a newspaper that had been rubber-banded and hadn’t quite relaxed yet.

“So.” I pressed my hands onto the cool kitchen island and stared at the papers instead of him. “What’s this about?”

Theo was quiet for a moment. Mirroring me, he rested his palms on the island as he took in a deep breath. “I know you’ve already made up your mind. But…I think there’s more to this.”

I exhaled hard. “What else could there be? We’ve beaten every dead horse within a hundred-mile radius. I know it hurts—it hurts me too—but I need to start moving on.”

Theo flinched. “Well, while we were beating dead horses, I think we missed the elephant in the living room.”

I raised my eyebrows. “And that is…?”

“It’s…” He gulped. “The thing is, you and Nate were the two brightest spots left in my life, and it took losing you for me to realize how dark the rest of it had gotten.”

My spine prickled. “What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t think the problem was us.” He met my eyes. “I think…I think it was me.”

I held his gaze but said nothing.

“I need help, Cam.” His voice was unsteady. “I’m scared. This…the thoughts I’ve had—they’re terrifying.”

My blood turned cold. “What kind of thoughts?”

"I mean…" He paused, then took a long, deep breath. "You want to know why I didn't come here the night you had me served? Why it took four fucking days?"

I nodded.

"Because I just spent seventy-two hours in the psych ward."

"The psych—" I blinked. "What?"

He lowered his gaze and raked a hand through his hair. "The night after you had me served, I kind of lost it. I had too much to drink. *Way* too much to drink."

Pressing my lips together, I didn't speak. Theo had never been a heavy drinker, so this was definitely news.

"After I passed out," he went on, "Taylor found me. She asked if I was trying to kill myself, and to be honest?" He lowered his hand and looked me in the eye. "I don't know."

My heart fell into my feet. "Are you suicidal?"

"I'm…" He stared at the counter. "I don't know. I'm a mess, that's what I am."

"And us getting back together will fix that?" I gritted my teeth. "Either I take you back or you kill yourself?"

"No! No. It's nothing like that." He drummed his fingers on the counter, and that was when I realized his hands were shaking. "I'm not asking you to take me back out of pity. I'm not saying we have to get back together or I'll kill myself. It's nothing like that. What I'm saying is that there's something wrong." He tapped his temple. "Up here. And it's been wrong for a while now. I *need* help. And maybe… maybe if I can fix some of this shit, then maybe we can fix what's wrong between us. Because I think this"—he touched his temple again —"played a pretty big role in fucking up this." He gestured at both of us.

I swallowed, not sure what to say.

"I know it seems like we've passed a point of no return," he said. "But I don't think that's true. I don't think there's anything wrong here that we can't fix. Or at least make better."

"So what do you suggest?" I whispered.

"I'm…I hadn't gotten that far yet. We could try being friends again. We could move back in together. I really don't know."

That made two of us.

Theo shifted his weight. "Whatever we do, it's…" He hesitated, holding my gaze but drawing back a little, like he thought I might come over the counter at him. "It's gonna take both of us."

"So, supporting you while you get help."

"That." He set his jaw. "But I think you need some too."

I stood straighter. "Come again?"

"Cam, you're not yourself anymore. You haven't been for a long

time."

Chest tightening, I glared at him. "What are you talking about?"

His eyebrow arched. "All those times you got on my case for little shit, I—"

I bristled, but he put up a hand.

"Just listen," he pleaded.

I shifted my weight but said nothing.

"When we got together," he said quietly, "you were so laid-back. I mean, you were definitely the tidier one. But it was fine. And then, somewhere along the line, it wasn't just that you wanted things a certain way. It was like…" His eyes lost focus, and he gnawed his lip as the silence lingered. Finally, he looked at me again. "One day you were just happier if things were organized the way you wanted them. And the next, I was scared to death to leave something out of place because it would start a fight."

It was my turn to stare at the island.

He wasn't done yet either. "I might be completely off the mark, but I think that might be what made us fall apart."

I flicked my eyes up. "How so?"

"Well, I mean, I thought we were drifting apart, and in a way, we were. But not the way I thought."

I tilted my head. "So…what way?"

"Like…" He swallowed. "You were getting more obsessed with things being a certain way. To the point it *had* to be stressing you out."

I shifted my weight but didn't speak.

"Basically, we were butting heads and falling apart because you cared about everything to the point it was driving you insane, and I…" He released a long breath. "I was so depressed, I'd stopped caring about *anything*."

For a moment, I just chewed on what he'd said. And the more I thought about it—replaying the last year or so with that in mind—the more it made sense. Perfect sense. Enough that I couldn't believe I hadn't put the pieces together until now.

Deflating a little, I ran a hand through my hair. "Holy shit."

"I'm not here to make accusations," he whispered. "We've done enough finger-pointing. All I want is to fix this. If we can."

I nodded slowly. "One question."

"Okay?"

I moistened my parched lips. "Were you depressed because of me?"

"I don't know why I was." He shook his head. "I don't know why I am. When they were grilling me during that psych eval, I started realizing this has been going on for a long, long time. At least since we

lost our jobs. Maybe even before that. But it's never gotten better." He paused, and softly added, "For either of us. And since we weren't helping ourselves, we were making it worse for each other too."

I chewed the inside of my cheek.

"You want to know why I flaked out on those design gigs?"

"Theo…" I winced. "I was angry. I didn't—"

"I think it's important."

"Okay…"

He let out a long breath. "I *couldn't* take on the gigs you brought to me. I wanted to. God, I wanted to."

I studied him for a moment. Then, softly, I asked, "Why not?"

"Because I literally *couldn't* do the work." He lifted his gaze. "I'd sit down to work on something—on my own, or a job, whatever—and…nothing would happen. Nothing."

My heart sank. Theo without his art was… God, that was like Nate without his music.

"Every time I tried," he went on, "I felt lower. Like I wasn't just a failure as a banker, but I was failing as an artist too. Something I'd always been good at it, even when I was just doing it for myself for fun…" He shook his head slowly. "It was gone. I'd…lost it. And to be honest, I still can't find it."

"Jesus. I didn't know you were struggling so hard." My own words made me flinch. How had I missed it?

"I couldn't do my art. I couldn't function most of the time." He swallowed hard. "Then it started affecting us more and more. Like there's all the times we fought about me leaving a coffee can out on the counter. Which…I know. I *know* that stuff bothers you. And when we arguing about it, I'd get pissed because…" He closed his eyes and exhaled, as if he were struggling to keep his composure. When he met my gaze this time, there was a hint of a shine in his eyes. "Cam, I hated the fact that you had your shit together so much that you had the energy to give a damn about where a coffee can was sitting."

"What?" I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean…" His Adam's apple bobbed. "The thing is, there have been times where getting out of bed takes effort I can't even describe. And when we'd have these fights, you were so angry about me leaving something out, and I just wanted to break because I didn't know how to tell you that it had already taken everything I had just to get to the kitchen in the first place."

My lips parted, and my stomach dropped into my feet. "It was that bad?"

Eyes down, Theo nodded. "I couldn't figure out why these little things pissed you off so much, and I just got angry that you were getting on my case. A little thing like putting a can of coffee away. It

seemed so simple for you that I could've just put it away, like it was that easy, and it seemed to me that if it was that easy, it wasn't worth screaming about it. I was struggling so hard to get from one end of the day to the other, and trying to walk on eggshells at the same time…" He sniffed sharply and swiped at his eyes.

"Oh my God. Theo, I am so…" I ran out of breath, so I just stepped around the island and gathered him in my arms. "I am so sorry."

He held me tighter than he had in a long time. "It wasn't your fault. We were both fucked up. *Are* both fucked up."

"Still." Stroking his hair, I pushed out a breath. "I didn't know I was putting you—"

"Neither of us meant to do any of it." He drew back, and as he met my eyes, he touched my face. "Even if we did, I don't care. I just want to *fix* this."

"Me too." And I did. God, I did. Even after filing for divorce and taking the first steps toward moving on, things felt different. Like we'd found a second wind. I let him go, but took his hand. "Let's go sit. Maybe someplace more comfortable."

Theo just nodded.

Hand in hand, we moved to the living room and sat on the couch.

"I hadn't even realized there was something wrong with me," I said.

"It hasn't always been like that." He squeezed my hand. "There's help. For both of us."

I avoided his eyes, and in doing so, shifted my gaze toward the coffee table. And suddenly, the neurotic side of me, that obsessive need for everything to be in a specific place—it seemed so conspicuous. Every magazine was lined up perfectly with the edge. Largest issues on the bottom. Smallest on top. Sorted by date. There were three pens on the table, all parallel and perfectly flush with each other. The coasters were stacked and also lined up with the table's edge. The remotes, my blue day planner, the rack of coasters—the arrangement had never struck me as neurotic until now. But it was.

"Holy shit," I whispered. "I really am fucked up."

"We both are." Theo put his hand on my knee. "And I'm worried about you. Things like leaving a coffee can out. I know it annoys you, but it never used to piss you off like that."

I rolled the thought around in my head. As much as it shamed me to admit it, he was right. When had I started getting pissed off about things like that? Sitting here now, with my temper in check, it seemed ridiculous to get that fired up. And yet I could also recall how I'd felt in those moments, and how genuinely furious I'd been.

"Oh God." I leaned forward, sliding both hands into my hair. "I

don't…I don't know what happened."

Theo put a gentle hand between my shoulder blades, and that soft touch nearly crumbled what was left of my composure.

"It's like…I used to be able to handle things," I said. "And then suddenly everything seemed so…important?" I lifted my head. "I don't know if that's the right word. But I've…" My cheeks burned. "I've had panic attacks. Over stupid shit."

Theo's lips parted. "You have?"

"Yeah."

"I had no idea."

"I know. It always seemed to happen when I was alone. When I'd get pissed at you, it was…shit, it was almost like it kept me from losing it the other way."

Theo swallowed.

"I don't know why. It scares the hell out of me when it happens. And it'll be the stupidest things. Like—" I fought a losing battle to keep my voice even. "Do you have any idea what it's like to have a panic attack because you left your wallet on the nightstand instead of the dresser, and now you don't know what *else* you fucked up?"

"Jesus."

"It's happened more and more the last couple of years. Like it—" My heart was speeding up and my head was getting light, so I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Theo took my hand. "You okay?"

I nodded. Eyes still shut, I just breathed for a moment, and he let me. He didn't speak. Didn't do anything except hold my hand and let me come back down.

After a while, when my heart was beating a little slower and I didn't feel like I was going to pass out, I said, "You remember when we fought over my day planner?"

Theo fidgeted. "Yeah."

"You really want to know why I was so upset?"

He looked at me, and I thought he might shake his head.

Please, Theo. If we're going to get this out in the open, let's not do it halfway.

Finally, though, he nodded.

I took a deep breath. Then released it and took another, just to keep myself calm. "I know you meant well. Asking what kind of backup I had if I lost that thing, or if it was damaged. And I…I got what you were saying. I did. But then I started freaking out over it. Like, what if I did lose it? So I was starting to panic, and then I was pissed off at you for putting me in that state of mind, and—"

"Shit," he whispered, squeezed my hand. "If I had known…"

"I know. And looking back, I can't believe I didn't even know." I

ran my other hand through my hair, wondering when I'd started sweating. "When did little stupid things turn into life-or-death crises?"

"Probably around the same time little stupid things like making coffee turned into moving a damned mountain for me." He brought my hand up and kissed it. "I'm serious, Cam—I think we both need help, and I think when we do, we can fix *us*."

I turned to him. "You don't think we've done too much damage?"

"I still want us to work." He shrugged as if his shoulders weighed a hundred pounds. "That has to count for something, right?"

"I think so." I slipped my fingers between his. "I want us to work too." *But what if we fail again? I don't know if I can lose you twice.* I couldn't hold his gaze, so I lowered it, but Theo tipped my chin up.

"I love you, Cam," he whispered.

"I love you too."

He cupped my cheek, drew me in, and pressed his lips to mine.

That tender kiss nearly broke me.

Wrapping my arms around him, I deepened the kiss, and as he ran his fingers through my hair, I shivered. No, I *couldn't* lose him again. And I wouldn't.

What kind of idiot was I to ever let you go?

Or push you away?

I broke the kiss and caressed his face. "I think there's something we need to do."

His eyes widened a little. "What?"

I took his hand and rose, gesturing for him to do the same.

He followed me back into the kitchen where the papers on the counter refused to be ignored.

I picked them up. "We need to do something about these."

"So." He swallowed. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well…" I pulled open the junk drawer, and paused. God, Theo was right. I really had gone beyond neat freak. Even the junk drawer was organized. When had I put a silverware tray in here? All the pens were in one slot. Rubber bands were neatly piled at the end of the spoon slot.

Yeah. I needed help as much as he did.

But right this second, I needed a lighter, and there were two, so I grabbed one. Facing him again, I held up the papers and the lighter. "You want to do the honors?"

Theo smiled. *Really* smiled.

He took the lighter from me. As I held the papers over the sink, he flicked the lighter and brought the flame up to the corner farthest from my hand.

The corner started to curl inward and darken. Then it ignited, and we both watched the flames chew their way through the document.

Before the fire reached my fingers, I dropped the flaming papers into the sink. Once they'd burned to ashes, I ran the faucet over them to extinguish any lingering embers. The wet ashes scattered in the sink —not to mention those that had fluttered up onto the counter—made my eye twitch, but I turned away from the whole mess.

Ignoring the mess and facing Theo, I slid my hands over his hips and drew him closer.

"I am so sorry," I whispered against his lips.

"I know. So am I." He kissed me and let it linger for a moment. Then broke away. "What do we do about Nate?"

His name was like a swift kick in the gut. I brought Theo's hand up and kissed his fingers. "We'll talk to him. We'll…we'll figure something out." I looked in his beautiful blue eyes. "Right now, I've got you. I can't think any further ahead than that."

"I can think a little further ahead than that." Grinning, he raised his eyebrows. "Far enough to get to the bedroom."

I shivered, returning that grin.

And without another word, we hurried upstairs.

Chapter Thirty

Theo

I hadn't been in this bedroom in far too long, and now I was here, tumbling onto the mattress in Cam's arms. We were still dressed, but I didn't care. His clothes gave me something to hold on to, something to curl my fingers around and use to keep him as close to me as possible.

Not that he seemed in any hurry to pull away. He was on top, hips pressed against mine, and Jesus fucking Christ, I couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed me this way. Deep. Passionate. It had been ages since we'd had sex with any kind of enthusiasm, and there was nothing half-assed about this.

Raking my fingers through his hair, I whispered, "God, I missed you."

"I missed you too," he murmured against my lips. "Welcome home."

My heart fluttered, and I held him closer and kissed him deeper.

It was funny how someone I'd been with so many times over so many years could suddenly feel completely new again. It was like every inch of him was as familiar as my own hands, and yet at the same time, like someone I'd never touched before. And one thing was damn sure—I couldn't get enough of him.

Kissing him hungrily, I slid my hands under his shirt. His muscles quivered beneath my touch, and he pulled in a sharp breath through his nose.

"Oh God," he breathed.

I pushed his shirt up. "I haven't seen you naked in way too long," I growled, and my own words sent goose bumps prickling along my arms. "Maybe we should do something about that."

"Maybe?" He grinned, kissed me once more, and sat up. As I watched, holding my breath, he peeled off his shirt, and…oh Jesus. It really had been too long. I ran my hands up his abs and chest, and kept right on going until I slid them around the back of his neck and pulled him back down to me.

We lay on our sides beneath the covers, and for ages, just kissed and stroked each other. An orgasm was the furthest thing from my mind—all I wanted was Cam.

The only thing missing was Nate. I was all too aware of the emptiness in our bed, but I told myself over and over, we'd talk to him. We'd try our damnedest to bring him back to us.

Tonight, I needed to be sure Cam and I had really found our way back to each other.

"I want you so bad," I murmured. "I've missed—"

He claimed a deep, hard kiss that told me the feeling was very, very mutual. Gripping my hair, his leg hooked around mine and keeping me as close to him as possible, he kissed me hungrily.

"I missed this," he said between kisses.

"I missed *you*." I held him tighter. "Everything about you."

"Me too." He dragged his nails up my back, sending a shiver right down to my toes. "This bed's been empty without you."

My whole world's been empty without you.

But I didn't speak. I just kissed him again, and let myself get lost in his touch and his body heat. I wouldn't have been at all surprised if I came, if we both came, and we just kept right on going.

Where the hell have we been?

I pushed Cam onto his back and climbed on top. Before I could kiss him again, though, he grabbed my hair and pulled my head back. I shivered, and again when his lips brushed beneath my jaw. My whole body tingled and trembled as he kissed his way down one side of my neck, then back up the other.

"Lube," he murmured against my neck. "Need—"

I was already on it. I reached for the nightstand, rifled around in the drawer, and found the bottle.

I'd barely situated myself on top of him again, though, before he took the bottle.

I gulped. "Who's on top?"

Cam grinned, nudging me to lift my hips a little. "Stay just like this."

"Just—" I gasped at the coolness of the lube, and moaned as he coated both our dicks with it. Slowly, I started rocking my hips, sliding against him and fucking into his fist.

"Oh shit," I whispered. "That feels so…"

"Uh-huh." His other hand curved into my hair and pulled me to him, and we kissed breathlessly as I thrust against him and he stroked us both with a slick hand.

Making out, rubbing against each other, holding on for dear life—we weren't in any hurry, but we weren't slowing down for anything either. Every time he reminded me who he was—those throaty moans I'd memorized years ago, the way Cam and only Cam kissed me, the way he added the slightest twist to his strokes—I thought I was going to break down. Arousal kept me going. Emotions nearly brought me to pieces. As we moved and kissed and panted, I didn't care if I came or if I cried as long as I was in his arms. I had never needed him this badly in all the years we'd been together.

"Oh God, Theo," he moaned, and nothing had ever turned me on or driven me nearly to tears like the way he said my name just then.

His voice strained, his body trembling, his back arching, and he still had the presence of mind to know it was me.

My breath caught. Then his did. A violent shudder lifted his hips and tightened his hand around both of us, and my whole body seized with the force of my orgasm. I didn't know if I was thrusting or shaking or both, only that I was coming, and he was coming, and our cocks were still sliding against each other as we both fell apart.

He shuddered one last time, and his grip loosened.

I shuddered one last time, and my arms almost collapsed out from under me.

He pulled me down into a clumsy, breathless kiss, and murmured, "I love you."

"I love you too." Why did I sound like I was crying? Why did he?

Our eyes met, and yeah, once I'd blinked mine into focus, his were extra shiny too.

We both smiled. He brushed his thumb across my cheek, then kissed me again.

I broke the kiss, buried my face against his neck, and just held him for a moment. He held me too, tightly, and neither of us made a sound for the longest time. We'd been apart for too long, and letting go seemed like the last thing we should be doing now.

Eventually, though, we did pull apart. I grabbed some tissues off the nightstand, and we cleaned ourselves off.

Then we settled into bed. Into *our* bed. And my God, it actually felt like we weren't just settling. Everything was. The whole world had been in chaos for the last year or so, especially recently, and now…I could breathe. Arms around Cam, his skin warming mine beneath familiar sheets, I could *breathe*.

This wasn't over yet. There was still damage that needed repairing. Still, the worst seemed to be behind us now. We'd found our way back to each other. Tonight, there wasn't much more I could ask for.

Cam met my gaze. "I know it must've been hard as hell," he whispered, trailing his trembling fingers down my cheek, "but I am so glad you came back tonight."

"Me too." My eyes stung—he couldn't possibly understand exactly what it had taken to convince myself to come here, or how many times I'd turned the car around and made it halfway back to my brother's before I'd talked myself *back* into it. He couldn't understand, but he didn't have to. He'd let me in. He'd listened. He'd finally heard everything I'd been struggling to understand myself.

And we'd landed here.

I slid closer and kissed him. "It's going to be a long road. We're not going to fix this overnight."

“I know.” He smiled, and I thought there might’ve been tears in his eyes too. “But I think we can fix it.”

“So do I.”

He pressed his lips to mine, and for a while, we just lay there in silence, enjoying the warmth of being in bed together for the first time in God knew how long.

And slowly, Nate’s absence worked its way back into the picture. This bed suddenly seemed way too big for the two of us, and things weren’t settled yet because it wasn’t the three of us under the sheets.

I met Cam’s gaze and brushed a strand of hair off his forehead. “I think we need to talk to Nate. As soon as possible.”

He nodded. “Agreed.”

“What happens…” I gnawed the inside of my cheek. “We have to consider that he might really be done with us. What happens if he won’t see us? Or if he isn’t interested in coming back?”

Cam fidgeted, his lips twisting a little. “I’m not sure I want to think about that.”

“We might not have much choice. He was pretty upset when he left.”

Cam nodded. He started to speak but hesitated, chewing his lip as he watched himself play with the hem of the sheet.

“What?” I asked.

“I…”

I put my hand over the top of his. “Talk to me, Cam.”

He pulled in a slow breath and met my gaze. “I can almost guarantee any counselor we talk to is going to tell us to jettison Nate.”

My heart dropped.

“And we talked about this like crazy back when he joined us,” Cam went on. “If we weren’t on solid ground, there was no way we could make it work with him too. And now…” He swallowed.

Blood pounded in my ears, a queasy feeling crawling up my throat as I braced myself for what was coming.

“The thing is,” he said, “we’re still on shaky ground. And part of me thinks that’s the worst possible time to add a third person. But…I miss him. We were a family, you know?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Doesn’t feel right without him.” I paused. “I mean, I don’t want this—us—to depend on bringing him back. I love you no matter what. But I feel the same for him.”

“Exactly. And maybe if we can patch things up with him and with each other at the same time, we can all be stronger for it. As a group, not just as a couple.”

Nodding again, I willed my heart to slow down. I knew damn well it was risky. There was no way in hell we’d have ever taken in a third person—not even for one-night stand—when we were having

problems. But we'd been in good shape when Nate entered the picture, and he'd become a more permanent fixture than any of us had expected. Bringing him back in now didn't seem like a risk so much as another step toward repairing our family.

"We'll send him a message," Cam said. "Break the ice. See if he'll talk to us."

"Do we tell him?" I raised my eyebrows. "Or wait until we can see him in person."

"If he's willing to see us, I'd say let's wait." He absently stroked my arm. "This doesn't seem like something we should discuss over Skype."

"Good idea." Even if it meant shelling out for plane tickets and a hotel, spending hours in airports and planes, all on the off chance he might be willing to hear us out, and an even slimmer chance he might take us back.

"In the meantime…" Cam stroked my hair. "Do you want to move back in? Or take things slow?"

"I'm not sure. What do you think?"

Cam shook his head. "No idea. I *want* you back here. It hasn't felt right without you. But…"

I swallowed. "Maybe we can ease into it. A few nights a week here. A few nights apart."

"I guess that could work."

"But we'd—" I dropped my gaze.

"What?"

I took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. "Whether we ease back into it or I come back full-time, we're going to have to be patient with each other."

"I know," he whispered. "And now that I can see what you were talking about…" He grimaced. "Fuck, I don't even know why any of that was worth fighting over. I don't know why it turned into such an obsession. I really don't. Somewhere along the line, I started getting freaked out if I didn't have everything perfectly organized and scheduled and spotless." Cam swallowed. "But I don't live by myself." He met my gaze, brow pinching. "You were here too. And I just…I had no idea I was making you so miserable."

"I wasn't helping." I brought his hand to my lips and kissed his palm. "We were both a mess."

"No kidding."

I thought for a moment. "Why don't we do this—let's take it a night at a time. If things start getting tense, I'll spend the next night at Zach's. No hard feelings. Just part of the process."

"That could work." He paused. "Or maybe, let's keep things the way they are for the moment, and once we've talked to a counselor,

we can go from there?"

I mulled it over, then nodded. "That's probably a good idea." I caressed his face and looked into his eyes. "We'll get in touch with Nate. Hopefully he'll be willing to hear us out." I managed a slight smile. "You were willing to hear *me* out, after all, so…"

Cam nodded. "Yeah. We can get in touch with him in the morning. He's probably performing tonight. I don't want to distract him."

"Agreed." I paused. "We can also start looking around for therapists."

"Definitely," he breathed.

I smiled. "So, what about tonight?"

"Well." Cam pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. "If it makes any difference, I don't want you to leave."

I ran my hand down his side. "I don't want to leave."

"Then don't." He tipped my chin up and kissed my mouth this time. "I promise you won't get bored."

I laughed, wrapping my arms around him. "Oh yeah? How are you gonna keep me entertained?"

He slid a hand down between us. "I can think of a few things…"

Chapter Thirty-one

Nate

If I hadn't been on vocal rest, I'd have unleashed the longest, loudest string of profanity my band had ever heard. Even on vocal rest, it took a fuckload of restraint to keep those curses to myself.

With two hours till sound check, though, I didn't dare. Not after the last three shows had worn my voice dangerously thin.

Glaring at my phone, I ground my teeth.

Can we see you?

Four words. Four simple, one-syllable, benign-looking words from Cam that raised a million questions. Like why? And when? And where?

And…*we*?

I texted back the only thing I could think of: *What's going on?*

As the message sent, I realized it was going to both of them.

What the hell? So, were they back together? Or was this another one of those heavy conversations that would be miserable for all of us but needed to happen so we could put our relationship to bed? Pounding a few more nails into that goddamned coffin so this could finally be over?

Why? I asked.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Would it change anything? Such as, say, the "fuck no" that I was struggling not to send? Regardless of why, I wasn't sure I could see them again. Not this soon, at least. Facing them that night in LA had been one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Walking away? Even worse.

The thought of seeing them and walking away from them *again* pushed down on my shoulders. I was nowhere near over them. This wound was way, way too raw.

My phone buzzed again.

We want to talk. About the 3 of us.

My eyes stung. I had to wipe them before I read the message for the second time. Again before the fifth time.

Guys, I wanted to say, *there isn't a three of us anymore. There isn't a two of you, and there isn't a three of us. Please, let it go. Let* me *go.*

But I made myself write back, *I won't be in LA anytime soon.*

Almost immediately, Cam replied, *We're in Orlando.*

I exhaled and closed my eyes. Fuck my life. They were serious, weren't they? They'd already flown out here, set up shop in a hotel, and expected me to come traipsing their way after my show like I'd always done before. On the other hand, we could get this thing over

with tonight, and I could move on. Again.

Assuming I even went to see them. Which I didn't have to do. And probably shouldn't do. But…

I stared at the messages, gnawing on my lip. I couldn't quite tap out N-O and turn off my phone. A queasy nervous feeling started in my gut, and I didn't know if I was edgier about seeing them, or refusing and then never knowing what they'd come to say.

Maybe I should do it. It's one more conversation. What can it hurt?

Why was I doing this to myself? I wasn't going to get any closure.

Though, if they had come here together, maybe that was a good sign. Maybe they'd pulled themselves together and figured their shit out.

I shook my head. Didn't matter if they had. I wasn't getting pulled into the middle of that again. I hadn't minded being the third member of their marriage. I did, however, object to the pressure of being the last tie that bound them together. Being in the middle of a breakup? Never again. No fucking way.

But we had a lot of history as a triad. Maybe they just wanted to put things to rest peacefully. End on a not-so-sour note or something.

Whatever the case, I couldn't bring myself to tell them to fuck off, so I wrote back, *Send your hotel info—Will be there after my show.*

Then I left the bus to join my band for sound check.

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The first thing I did when I was backstage was down most of a bottle of water and dump the rest over my head. The second thing was check my phone, and sure enough, Cam had written back with an address and room number.

I replied, *Show's over. Be there ASAP.*

I toweled myself off and joined my band outside. There, as always, I signed autographs and took pictures with fans outside, and once they'd dispersed, went back to the bus.

While my bandmates relaxed and debated going out partying, I showered and changed into a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt. With an app on my phone, I summoned a cab, and on the way out the door, I shoved some cough drops into my pocket and tossed another in my mouth. I wasn't sick—I hoped—but my throat had been raw the last few nights. My voice was almost gone.

Hopefully Cam and Theo planned to do most of the talking. I didn't have much to say to either of them anyway, and not much left to say it with.

I waited for the cab at the venue's back gate. Despite the Florida heat, I wore a cap and jacket, hoping for just a little bit of camouflage.

When the guy picked me up, I gave him the address for Cam and Theo's hotel, texted the guys to let them know I was on my way, and sucked on a cough drop while he drove me across town.

At the hotel, I got out, and out of habit, I kept my head down on the way in, nestling it in my jacket. There didn't seem to be anyone around, though. Not this late at night. A few security guys and bellhops, but no one shoving a camera in my face.

I probably should've been nervous. Or pissed off. Or…something. But I didn't feel anything. Just a big hollow pit in my stomach where my emotions were supposed to be, but weren't.

Numbly, I walked to the elevator and took it up to the fifth floor. The days of meeting the guys in hotel rooms in between concerts seemed like another lifetime. Had there really been a time when we'd meet up, fuck until we couldn't move, and enjoy each other's company before counting down the days until the next visit? When seeing one of them *hadn't* made me wonder what had gone wrong this time, or how bad things had gotten, or if they'd made any progress at all?

Well, if there had been a time like that, it was over now. This would be our last hotel visit.

The elevator let me off, and I followed the numbered doors to their room. There, I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath. I raised my hand and went to tap my knuckle on the door, but hesitated.

Why was I doing this to myself? Even if they had reconciled, there was no place for me in their marriage anymore. The last few weeks had made it abundantly clear that they weren't as stable as we'd all thought, and when they inevitably fell apart, it would fall on me to keep them going until I couldn't carry the relationship anymore. That wasn't what I'd signed up for.

I lowered my hand and stepped back. I'd just text Cam and let him know I'd changed my mind.

As I started walking back to the elevator, I rolled my shoulders, wondering when they'd become so damn tense. Oh, probably around the time Cam and Theo separated, which was that much more reason for me to keep walking and never look back.

Except I haven't slept since I saw them last.

And every page in my notebook is all about how much I miss them, not how much I hate them.

I do miss them. Who am I kidding?

A few feet shy of the elevator, I stopped. I cursed into the silent hallway.

Who *was* I kidding? Fuck it. I never could tell these guys no.

I exhaled, turned on my heel, strode back to the room, and knocked on the door.

Footsteps on the other side. I gulped.

Cam opened the door and met my gaze with a gentle smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I kept my cards close to my vest. “So, you’re both here?”

“Yeah.” Theo’s voice came from behind Cam, and as I stepped into the room, I saw him sitting on the edge of one of the beds. He rose, as did my pulse.

I shut the door behind me with my foot. “You guys bet a lot of money on whether or not I’d actually show up.”

“It’s worth the risk,” Theo said softly. “We wanted to see you.”

Do you guys have any idea what you’ve put me through?

Teeth clenched, I folded my arms, my jacket creaking quietly. “Okay, why? Seems like we could’ve just talked on the phone or Skype.”

They looked at each other.

Cam turned to me. “We thought about it. Believe me. But we thought…”

“The same as when we broke up,” Theo said. “You deserved to hear it in person.”

“We wanted you to know we were serious.”

I avoided their eyes, tightening my arms and staring at the carpet between us. “Hear what? Serious about what?”

Cam wrapped his arm around Theo’s waist. Theo leaned just slightly into him. Well, that answered that, didn’t it?

I set my jaw. “What changed?”

“We both realized we need help,” Theo said. “Not just as a couple, but…both of us. On our own.”

“Meaning?”

Cam shifted uncomfortably. “Theo’s got some serious depression to work through. And I guess I’ve got some really bad anxiety.”

I avoided their eyes. That did make a lot of sense. Theo’s steady downward spiral, Cam’s obsessiveness about everything—okay, so they were on to something.

Theo went on, “We were both dealing with it badly and had no idea what was going on with ourselves or each other. So it pretty well took its toll on our marriage too.”

“We’re working on getting professional help,” Cam said. “It’s going to take time. But we are back together. And…” He hesitated. “Nate, we miss you. We want you to come back.” Beat. “I mean, not like fly back, but—”

“I know what you mean.” I couldn’t look at either of them, so I brushed past Cam and stood at the window. I stared outside, focusing on the glowing turquoise pools and the backlit row of palm trees. “Do you guys have any idea what kind of hell that was? When the two of you broke up?”

"Yes," Cam said. "And we both feel terrible for putting you through that. Apparently we needed to hit absolute rock bottom to put our marriage back together, but we never meant to hurt you in the process."

"You guys have said that all along," I growled. "But now we know what happens." I focused hard on the glow of the pool below us. "When you guys start falling apart, I get caught in the middle."

"We're not doing that again," Cam said. "We're getting a marriage counselor for us. If things don't work out, we'll find a way to deal with it without dragging you into it the way we did."

"If things don't work out." I forced out a breath. "You don't sound very optimistic."

"We're doing the best we can." Theo came a little closer, almost into my peripheral vision. "None of us can predict the future. We can just work our asses off to stay together. Separating was…"

"A mistake?"

"No." Theo's voice was almost inaudible. "It was probably what we needed. A wakeup call so we could see how fucked up we were as individuals and as a couple. At this point, we can't promise we'll work it out and be together forever. There's just no telling how things will go in the future. I mean, what we just went through—we didn't see that coming when we got married, or when we went from two to three. So, we don't know. We can't know." He put a hand on my shoulder. "But we want to fix it. All of us."

I couldn't speak. My chest tightened with a million different emotions.

"You don't have to give an answer right now," Theo went on. "Tonight is just us telling you what's going on. And telling you that we love you, and we want you to come back."

"He's right." Cam stepped closer now. "We love you. We want to be…*us* again."

I blinked a few times, resisting the urge to wipe my eyes. "I love you both. There's no way I couldn't." *Not even when I've hated you*. I swallowed hard, my already raw throat aching with the threat of more emotions than I wanted them to see. "But I can't put myself in that position again."

Theo's hand slid off my shoulder.

"Nate," Cam whispered. "We're the ones who put you in that position. And there's no way in hell we're doing it again."

"But you want me back the way you had me before? How is that any different?"

"Well." Cam hesitated. "Maybe we need to come to some sort of agreement. About what happens if Theo and I do split up. Or if you and I do. Or you and Theo do."

I shifted my weight. It had never occurred to me that I might split with one of them and not the other. I'd always assumed if things didn't work out with two of us, I'd be the one to leave. And that was almost certainly still true—they had over a decade of history before I'd come into the picture—but something about him acknowledging that we weren't two-against-one gave me pause.

Steeling myself, I turned around and faced them. "One question."

They both watched me, waiting.

I cleared my scratchy throat. "If I don't come back, what happens?"

They glanced at each other.

"What do you mean?" Cam asked. "What happens to us?" He gestured at him and Theo.

I nodded.

Theo laced his fingers between Cam's. "Like we said, we're going to a counselor no matter what. Together. There's a lot of shit to sort out, but—"

"But you're staying together?" I asked.

They exchanged glances again, and when they looked at me, they both nodded.

"We're gonna try," Theo said. "We've got a lot of work to do, but yeah, we're gonna try."

Cam nodded. "Theo's moved back in. And we're just taking it one day at a time."

"So, without me…" I cleared my throat again. "You'll be okay?"

Both guys searched my eyes, as if they were trying to read between the lines.

"We were together for a decade before we met you," Cam said. "We didn't bring you into our marriage because we needed you to keep us together."

Theo nodded. "We brought you in because we fell in love with you. And we want you to stay because we love you. Not because we're lost without you."

Closing my eyes, I released a long breath. "I think that's…that's what I've been needing to hear."

"We're sorry for what we put you through," Cam said softly.

"I know. And I'd…I don't know why I try to say no to you guys." I laughed as I swiped at my eyes before I looked at Cam and Theo. "I love you both. And I've been missing you like crazy. I…I can't say no."

Theo started to wrap his arms around me, but I put a gentle hand on his chest. "Fair warning—I might be getting a cold or something."

He smiled, making my heart flutter, and he nudged my hand out of the way as he whispered, "I really don't care." And he kissed me.

And the whole world stopped.

This was real, wasn't it?

I broke the kiss, just needing to see both of them and confirm that, yes, this was real, but before I could speak or make sense of anything, Cam hooked a finger under my chin and turned my head toward him. His lips had barely touched mine before Theo's were on my neck, and my spine tingled. One of them slid a hand over my cock.

Oh God. Yes. It is *real.*

I didn't know if I was more moved or aroused. Cam and Theo were here with me, in love with each other, and bringing me back to them, and their hands and mouths were on me. Everything I'd thought was gone was here in this room.

Cam drew back a little and licked his lips. "Do you have to get back to the bus any time soon?"

I glanced at Theo, then the bed behind them, then back at Cam.

Heart speeding up, I shook my head. "Nope. You've got me all night if you want me."

"What a coincidence," Theo said with a toothy grin. "Because we do want you all night."

Chapter Thirty-two

Cam

The bed was only a few feet away from the window, but it seemed like miles away when we were trying to kiss and touch each other with every stumbling, staggering step. Finally, though, we made it onto the mattress, and as soon as Nate was horizontal, Theo pinned him down and kissed him hard, and for a moment, I couldn't move. All I could do was stare at them. They kissed passionately, almost violently, and I couldn't believe this was real.

It had been too long since I'd watched them kiss. From the very first night we'd brought Nate into our bed, I'd been mesmerized by the sight of those two making out. All these years later, that hadn't changed. In fact, it was arguably even stronger now because of how close we'd all come to losing this.

The first time I'd ever watched Theo and Nate kiss, there'd been that thrill of something new and crazy. We hadn't always been monogamous, but Nate was our first after a long dry spell, and watching the two of them make out had been insanely hot.

Now, it was as hot as it ever was, but this wasn't the same as that excitement of bringing someone new into our bedroom. This was both calming and exhilarating—bringing Nate *back* to us. There was an *us* for him to come back to, and he was here, and God, yes, it was fucking hot.

Nate pushed Theo back, and they turned onto their sides, so I molded myself to Nate and kissed the back of his neck. He squirmed a bit, turned, and found my lips with his.

"Need to get naked," he murmured between kisses. "Want…want to touch you."

"He's on to something," Theo said against Nate's skin. "Should really lose some of these clothes."

"Mmhmm."

We tried. After a few moments of pulling at clothes, I'd lost my shirt and Theo's belt was unbuckled, but Nate was completely naked. To hell with getting ourselves undressed when we had this gorgeous, tattooed man between us. We both went to town on him—kissing him all over, running our hands across his smooth, inked skin.

Theo bit down on Nate's shoulder, and I had goose bumps even before Nate whispered "Jesus fuck…"

So I did the same, pressing my teeth in just below the base of his neck, and he swore again, wriggling between us. Theo and I locked eyes over Nate's chest and grinned. Though neither of us said a word,

I knew what he had on his mind.

At the same time, we moved down toward Nate's hips.

"Oh shit," Nate groaned as we kissed along his hipbones. "Fuck, you guys…" He trailed off as we ran our lips and tongues up and down the shaft of his cock. We teased his balls, the head, the shaft—anything that could be taunted and tickled with our mouths was fair game. More than once, we came up at the same time and teased the head before we paused for a long kiss.

"That is so hot," Nate whispered.

Theo grinned against my lips. He drew the kiss out for a moment, then broke away and deep-throated Nate. While he did that, I kissed my way up Nate's abs, the muscles contracting beneath my lips. I teased his nipple with my teeth and tongue, and I had no doubt Theo was working all kinds of magic on Nate's cock.

"God…" Nate whimpered, arching his back as he gripped my hair. He pulled back, and when I lifted my head, he kissed me hungrily. He tugged at my belt, then broke that hungry kiss. "Why are you guys… so…" He gasped as Theo's teeth grazed his neck. "*Dressed?*"

"He's got a point," Theo said. "We really shouldn't have this many clothes on."

"Fix it," Nate growled. "Now."

"Yes, sir," I said. Theo and I got up and quickly stripped off the last of our clothes. In a matter of seconds, we were right where we'd all needed to be for far too long—wrapped up in sheets and each other. We kissed. We stroked and groped and touched each other. Their body heat alone was intoxicating, and every time I tasted one of them, or felt the low vibration of a helpless moan, I went just a little crazier.

Theo grabbed the back of my neck, hauled me to him, and kissed me hard. A shiver went right through me. Good God, this man turned me on. Theo and I had fucked almost every night since reconciling—even when we were sure our bodies had had enough—and the novelty of seeing and touching him hadn't even begun to wear off. His gorgeous toned body, his hot skin against mine, that aggressive, needy way he kissed.

"I wanna watch you two fuck," Nate moaned, squirming against me. "Been too long."

Without a second of hesitation, Theo broke the kiss and met my gaze. "Get on your back," he panted. "So we can both fuck you."

"Don't have to tell me twice." I rolled onto my back, and I'd barely landed on the mattress before Theo shoved my legs apart.

"Lube's over there." He gestured at his bag, which was on the other bed. Nate quickly grabbed the bag, rifled through it, and found the bottle. He returned to the bed and started putting some lube on

Theo while Theo put some on me, and I wouldn't have been surprised in the least if any or all of us came right then.

Somehow, we didn't, and I held my breath as Theo guided himself to me. Didn't matter how many times we'd fucked recently—including this morning right after we'd checked in—I couldn't get enough of his cock.

Theo had barely breached me before Nate knelt beside my shoulder and gently turned my head toward him. As Theo slid deeper inside me, Nate pushed his dick between my lips, and I damn near came as he started rocking his hips, fucking my mouth in the same slow, easy way Theo fucked my ass.

This was the very definition of heaven. Nothing in the world beat this. Nothing. My husband's thick cock deep inside me. Our boyfriend's in my mouth. Both of them naked and turned on and *here*.

"You guys are so fucking hot," Nate breathed, running his fingers across my chest. "Shit…"

Theo said something I didn't understand. Whatever. Words didn't matter. I was being fucked by the two men I loved, and I couldn't focus my mind on anything because I was too busy losing it.

Theo groaned, that throaty, guttural groan that meant he was so close. "G-gonna…oh fuck…"

I rocked my hips as much as I could in this position and moaned as Nate fucked my mouth a little faster. Theo's fingers dug into my hips, pressing against tender spots where he'd gripped me tightly this morning or last night or the night before, and his thrusts turned jerky and uneven. He shuddered, cursing through clenched teeth, and then forced himself all the way inside me, so hard I couldn't help but whimper around Nate's dick.

"M-my turn," he murmured. "To watch you fuck him."

"Don't mind if I do," Nate said.

Theo pulled out, and Nate didn't waste any time. He slipped his cock out of my mouth and took Theo's place, and my spine tingled as he slid easily into me.

I shivered. "Oh my God."

Nate groaned. "Fuck, you feel—"

"Sit up," Theo ordered.

Nate pushed himself upright, changing the angle of his strokes and turning my spine to liquid. He was about to speak, but Theo turned Nate's head toward him and silenced him with a kiss. Kneeling beside him, he wrapped an arm around Nate's waist, and…oh, Jesus. This was a dream. A fantasy. It had to be. I couldn't possibly be taking Nate's cock and watching the two of them make out. And Theo wasn't running his hand along my thigh…toward my hip…onto my dick…

Shit. Now Theo was stroking me in time with Nate's thrusts, all

the while kissing Nate deeply and tenderly and holy. Fucking. *Hell.*

"You're almost there, aren't you?" Theo murmured. I had no idea if he meant me or Nate, but he was right about both—I was unraveling, and judging by the soft whimper, so was Nate.

Nate gripped my thigh painfully tight. His other hand was behind Theo's neck, undoubtedly digging his fingers in and holding on for dear life. Moaning, he kept fucking me, though his rhythm was coming apart.

And so was I. Jesus. Nate kept fucking me. Theo kept stroking me. Nate's muscles quivered beneath flushed, sweaty skin, and then he broke away from Theo, panting hard and letting his head fall forward as his thrusts turned to sharp jerks. Theo didn't miss a beat—he kissed Nate's neck, and looked me right in the eye as his lips curved into a grin.

And I lost it.

"*Shit!*" I nearly levitated up off the bed as Theo kept pumping my dick while semen shot across my stomach.

Nate's eyes widened. His lips parted in a silent cry, and then his eyes rolled back and closed as he buried himself inside me and groaned.

With one last shudder from someone—I wasn't even sure who—we all stilled. Nate pulled out and slumped against Theo, who held him in a gentle embrace, stroking his hair as he caught his breath. As we *all* caught our breath.

Theo's eyes slid toward me, and he grinned. Holding my gaze, he pressed a soft kiss to Nate's temple.

We did it. We made it back to this. He's with us again.

Carefully, Theo let Nate go, and the two of them got up. I wasn't much steadier than Nate, but with Theo's help, made it to my feet.

Once we'd cleaned up, we staggered back to bed, and one by one, dropped onto the mattress. For the longest time, the only sound in the room was rapid, heavy breathing. Somewhere in the background, the AC buzzed quietly, and beyond that, cars drove past, oblivious to the three blissed-out men sprawled across this king-sized bed. This was the calmest I'd been in recent memory. Things weren't so up in the air anymore. I was lying in bed with the two men I loved more than anything—I had my family back.

I turned onto my side. Then Theo did the same. We faced each other with Nate in between us, and I draped my arm over Nate's stomach. Theo draped his over mine.

Nate coughed into his fist. "So, you guys do realize that whatever I have"—he gestured at his throat as if his scratchy voice didn't give him away—"you have now, right?"

"Eh." Theo shrugged. "That's what pizza-and-horror-movie

marathons are for."

Nate smiled. "That sounds like a blast." He paused. "Except I have to get back out on the road."

"It's okay." I touched his face and kissed him. "When you get back to LA, we'll be there."

"And we've got plenty of time to find some really crazy horror movies, too," Theo said.

Nate chuckled. "I'm really liking this idea."

"Me too." Theo kissed Nate's cheek. "So, it's a deal? We'll do our Valentine's Day tradition in February, but also when you get home from your tour?"

"Hell yeah." Nate grinned. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too," I said.

"Same here," Theo said.

Nate lifted his head and kissed me, then turned and kissed Theo. We all cuddled closer together, arms and legs tangled up.

"Any chance we can talk you into staying till morning?" Theo asked.

"Talk me into it?" Nate laughed. "I don't think you're gonna have to worry about that."

"Good."

I just smiled. The long road ahead didn't seem any shorter now, but it was a lot less daunting. Whatever obstacles we faced as Theo and I sorted out our respective problems—and our marriage—with therapists, I was confident we'd make it.

And when Nate's tour was over, he'd come home.

To us.

Epilogue

Theo

"If you want a massage, just ask for it." Cam's voice startled me, and I looked up to see him in the office doorway, arms folded loosely and a playful grin on his face.

"Hmm?"

"The way you're hunched over that thing." He gestured at my drawing pad. "You know damn well what that does to your neck."

I sat up a bit straighter, rolling my shoulders. Couldn't argue with him—the muscles were definitely starting to get stiff. "Sorry. Just got wrapped up in what I was doing."

"As always." He pushed himself off the doorframe and came closer. As he slid his hands over my shoulders, I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward, every muscle in my body immediately relaxing even before he started kneading gently.

I groaned. "You know, when this is what happens, it's almost worth straining everything."

"Uh-huh. That's what I thought."

"I'll stop in a few minutes. I'm *almost* done with this project." I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest, sliding my hands onto his as I looked up at him. "Give me another fifteen minutes, and I'll come help."

"Fifteen minutes." He kissed my forehead. "I'll be watching the clock."

"I know you will."

He laughed, then leaned a little farther and brushed his lips across mine. "Fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes. Promise."

One more kiss, and he left me to my work. I looked at the piece I'd been working on. It was almost done, but stepping away from it now wouldn't kill me. It'd give my eyes a break, not to mention my hands and my brain. When I came back, I might see some flaws that weren't as obvious now.

Did I really need to put in another fifteen minutes tonight? Probably not.

So I saved the document, sent a copy to a backup drive, and shut everything down.

Then I got up to go join Cam.

Two years ago, he wouldn't have been able to pry me from the screen until a project was done. If I was in a good enough mindset to work at all, then I was going to milk it for all it was worth and finish

the damned thing, because it was impossible to predict when I'd be like that again. That meant headaches, exhausted eyes, a fucked-up back, and some serious carpal tunnel, but I had to. It was just too risky to assume I could walk away, and not fall into one of those periods where I could barely pull myself out of bed, never mind produce something creative.

In the hallway, I paused to twist a crick out of my lower back and stretch my stiff neck. After spending several hours in the office, I was going to be a mess later, but thank God I had my husband's talented hands to work out all the soreness.

I continued into the kitchen, where Cam was making a couple of pizzas. He met my gaze over the kitchen island, and we both smiled.

"Almost ready," he said. "Hopefully these will be going into the oven when Nate gets here."

"Any idea when he'll be here?"

"He's on his way." He laughed, rolling his eyes. "Ran late at the studio. Again."

I chuckled. "And we're all shocked."

Nate's band was recording their third album, and, ever the workaholic and perfectionist, he rarely made it out of the studio when he planned to.

"Well, if he doesn't get here in time"—I leaned over the counter and snatched a few pieces of grated cheese from the one of the pizzas, narrowly missing a playful swat from Cam—"there's more for us."

"That would kind of defeat the purpose of making his favorite kind, right?" He nodded toward the pepperoni-and-mushroom pizza.

I wrinkled my nose. "True. Do you need me to do anything?"

"Nope." He sprinkled some more cheese on each pizza. "Everything's under control."

"Just stay out of the way, right?"

"Exactly."

"Yes, sir." I hoisted myself up onto the counter next to the stack of horror movies, staying well out of his way while he kept working. There'd been a time when I couldn't be anywhere near the kitchen while he was in here. His anxiety had crept so far into OCD-like territory, it was a stressful nightmare for both of us just to be in the same room while either of us tried to cook. And to hell with trying to cook *together*.

These days, though, it was better. Much better. We weren't quite back to where we'd been in our early years, when we could effortlessly navigate around each other and prepare a meal together, but…baby steps. We'd get there.

Funny—even after a year and a half of therapy and reconciliation, the peace in this house was still a novelty. Though it had been a slow

process. There'd still been some fights in the early days after I'd moved back in. Not enough to make me reconsider getting back together, but enough to remind me that this was going to be a process. A long one.

Finding a marriage counselor had been a challenge. We tried four in a row who immediately pointed to Nate as the problem. We'd brought in a third person? Of course our marriage was in trouble. Through a poly group, though, we finally found a practice where all the counselors were poly-friendly.

On our own, Cam and I saw separate therapists. They both specialized in depression and anxiety, but we decided it would be better to go to different people to keep things completely separate. Once in a while, he came to my appointments and I went to his, but for the most part, we went alone.

Independent of each other, our therapists both wanted us to try medication. At first, Cam and I were both reluctant. Neither of us was keen on the idea of medicating something like this. After I went through a short but horrible period of near-suicidal depression, though, Cam begged me to try.

And holy shit, they were a godsend. It took a little while to get the dosage right, but once we did, I started feeling human again. I found my way back to my art, and over time, my creativity had come back to life.

Not long after the antidepressants started working for me, Cam gave in and tried the antianxiety meds. What a difference. Jesus.

Everyone involved agreed that while Cam had probably always had some degree of anxiety, and I'd always had some degree of depression, the downward spiral was triggered when the investment firm had closed. Overnight, we'd lost our jobs, and trying to find new ones had been a bigger struggle than either of us could cope with. My depression went haywire, which made sense.

Cam going from anxiety to borderline OCD took a little longer to dissect. Eventually, though, his therapist concluded that the chaos of our career upheaval had given him a near-phobic reaction to disorder. When he felt things getting out of control, he panicked, and over time, that evolved into an obsessive need for order, which explained him constantly straightening things, organizing them, making lists, and freaking the fuck out if anything was out of place.

That wasn't something that was going to be fixed overnight any more than my depression was, but just putting the pieces together was an enormous step forward. The antianxiety meds were another one.

We both still had bad days. Sometimes, I was still dragged down into that funk that convinced me nothing was worth it and everything was terrible. But between Cam and me, I could identify it now. I knew

what it was. If I didn't call my therapist, Cam did, and he'd haul me into the office if he had to. Or if it wasn't bad enough to require professional intervention, Cam was learning when—and how—to coax me through the day or when to give me space. Even if he couldn't fix the problem, he was there. He was a gentle, supportive presence, and that alone made a huge difference.

Cam's anxiety still reared its ugly head sometimes too. On a trip to see Nate over the winter, our flights had devolved into a comedy of errors—delays, gate changes, mechanical malfunctions. Cam wasn't thrilled, but seemed to be doing okay right up until the delay that meant there was no chance of making our connecting flight. That delay turned out to be a blessing, because it gave me a chance to drag him away from the gate, calm him down, and convince him to eat something. His therapist had taught me a few techniques for centering him, and they'd made all the difference in the world. By the time we boarded our flight, he was frazzled, but collected.

After that trip, his therapist had recommended a few iPad card games for when he traveled. Specifically, the one-player variations of Solitaire. Those drove me insane, but they were like Valium for Cam. Something about organizing cards into piles, taking them from chaos to order, soothed him. A few months later, when we were stuck on a tarmac for two hours, he must've played three dozen games in a row, but it kept him calm.

The bad days were fewer and farther between, but they happened. They were simply the reality of our respective conditions. Thankfully, we'd learned techniques for coping with them and getting through them. We could help each other and help ourselves.

Nate had gone to as many therapy sessions with us as he could for the same reason, and he'd been a saint through all of this. When the antidepressant dosage had still been off, and my libido had gone out the window, both guys had been perfectly patient and content when we were in the bedroom. On the occasional trip without Cam—since our work schedules sometimes meant going to visit Nate alone—it wasn't unusual for Nate and me to lie in bed together, him writing in his notebook and me working on an art piece. Even now, after I'd leveled out, we still did that…usually after we'd fucked each other senseless.

And now that my mind was clearer and my marriage was back on the rails, I had more headspace for my artwork. In fact, I spent most of my workdays itching to get home and start drawing. I'd started taking on more freelance clients, and word of mouth was bringing in even more. If things kept going the way they were, I was about six months away from either cutting my hours at the bank or quitting altogether.

Over the last few months, there'd been some talk about moving

into someplace bigger. Nate was finally starting to see some money from his music—about fucking time they paid him—and Cam was raking it in with his A-list client roster. My income at the bank still wasn't spectacular, but I'd made peace with it. It was temporary—something to tide me over while I turned my true passion into a viable career.

So, between the three of us, and even with LA's exorbitant cost of living, we could afford something nicer. Something a bit bigger, in a better neighborhood.

Every time we'd start going over the process of selling this house and finding another, though, I could see the tension building in Cam's shoulders. We'd talked about it just last week, and it didn't take long for him to start shifting and fidgeting, wringing his hands on the table and damn near breaking a sweat.

Not yet, then. Things were better now, and they were calmer, and this house was enough for the three of us for the time being. Why add stress where it wasn't needed?

In a year or two, maybe. Our therapists concurred that it was best to let things be for a little while, and to maybe hold off on moving until Nate was back from his next tour. That gave us plenty of time to save a nice down payment, and it gave me time to make some moderate repairs that would have to be done before we sold the place anyway.

I was in no hurry. As much as some of the houses we'd looked at had made my mouth water, this one was finally home again. Like when we'd first moved in. Maybe staying here a little longer wasn't such a bad idea.

The garage door came to life and brought me back into the present.

Cam and I looked at each other, both grinning.

"Sounds like he's home," I said.

Sure enough, a car engine rumbled in the garage, and when it stopped, the door started down again. We'd reserved one of the garage bays for him, and Cam parked next to the house. With the fans and paparazzi hot on Nate's heels these days, it was better if he parked out of sight. Though, as Cam had pointed out to him not long ago, he might've had less trouble with that if he hadn't splurged on that bright yellow Porsche.

But hey. The guy was a rock star now. Might as well look the part.

The kitchen door opened, and Nate stepped in. His hair had grown out a little, and he'd bleached it platinum blond. Almost white. As always, it looked good on him. I hadn't yet seen a color he couldn't rock. Especially when he paired it with that ragged leather jacket.

"Hey." He grinned sheepishly as he shrugged off the jacket. "Sorry

I'm late."

"Don't worry about it." Cam put a hand on Nate's hip and kissed him lightly. "Dinner's not quite ready yet anyway."

"What?" Nate clicked his tongue. "What did I say about having dinner on the table and—"

"Shut up."

They exchanged playful glares, then both laughed. After one more kiss—this one a little longer—Nate came over to where I was sitting on the counter and stood up on his toes to kiss me.

"About time you got home," I murmured.

He huffed sharply, rolling his eyes like a petulant kid, but he couldn't hide the smirk. "I said I was sorry!"

I chuckled and kissed his forehead.

"What was the rush, anyway?" he asked. "You guys have big plans for tonight or something?"

Cam and I looked at each other.

Nate eyed us. "Wait…you do, don't you?"

"Well." Cam cleared his throat. "I'll be right back." He disappeared into the dining room.

Nate turned back to me. "What's going on?"

I ran my hands up the front of his chest. "You'll see."

"Tease."

Pulling him closer by the front of his shirt, I said, "Teases don't follow through."

"Mmhmm." He brushed his lips across mine. "Good point."

"Hey, hey." Cam tsked as he came back into the room. "Don't get started without me."

"Not my fault you left the room," I said.

"Whatever."

I held out my hand, and Cam placed a small box in it. We exchanged glances again—was he as nervous as I was?—and I faced Nate.

I pressed the box into his hand. "We got you something."

"What?" Nate took it, but shot us each a suspicious look. "Didn't we agree, no gifts this year?"

"We did," I said. "But open it anyway."

He shrugged and cut the tape with his thumbnail. "Fans and their weird gifts…"

Cam and I laughed, shaking our heads.

Nate lifted the lid off the box, and sobered. His lips parted. Slowly, almost uncertainly, he reached into it. When he withdrew his hand, he held the slim gold ring between his thumb and forefinger. "Is this…"

"Yes." Cam put his hand on my shoulder. "Now that we're back on

track, we decided to renew our vows. Just to put all that shit behind us and start over. It'll be a small thing. Us and maybe a few friends."

I nodded. "But the bottom line is that we want you there too." I glanced at Cam, and squeezed his hand as I faced Nate again. "We want you there, but not as a guest."

Nate stared at the ring, then back at us. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," I said. "It won't be a legal marriage, but we want to have the kind of commitment ceremony with you that we had before our marriage was legal."

"We can't make it legal," Cam said. "But we can make it official."

Nate smiled. "I don't care if it's legal. But you guys…you really…"

"Of course we do," I said. "You're as much a part of this family as we are."

Cam nodded. "You're the reason we made it back to each other. We wouldn't be together without you, and we wouldn't be complete without you."

Nate's eyes flicked back and forth between us, wide with disbelief. "You guys are really serious?"

"Completely," I said. "You've been with us for six years. You're the reason we made it through everything we did. Any ceremony we did now to renew our vows would be, well, nowhere near complete without you there with us."

"We'll understand if you can't wear the ring publicly," Cam said. "You're high profile, so it—"

"No." Nate closed his fingers around the ring. "I'll wear it."

I blinked. "But…the press, they'll—"

"Let 'em talk." He took a breath. "Honestly, I've been ready to go public about this for a while now. I'm not ashamed of you guys. Or of what we have. So, I've been thinking of coming out as gay, and if you guys are on board, I want to be out about us too."

Cam and I glanced at each other.

"You know the press will have a field day with it, right?" I asked.

"Yeah." Nate chuckled. "Course, if you think about it, the worst thing it'll do to my image is tame the whole 'bad-boy womanizer' persona. People will probably be less shocked about me being gay and involved with a couple of married man, and more blown away by me being exclusive and faithful."

I laughed. "That's probably true."

Nate turned serious again. "What about you guys, though? If the press finds out about me, then you're going to be all over the tabloids too."

"I can't imagine my clients caring." Cam shrugged. "It's LA. They've heard everything." He and Nate turned toward me.

I chewed my lip. I'd insisted on discretion from the start because I

didn't know how it would go over in the finance world. Plenty of my coworkers were gay, and they all knew I was married to a man, but a poly relationship was pushing the envelope. That was the kind of thing that could send promotion aspirations up in smoke. Might even get me fired from the miserable bullshit job that was graying my hair and raising my blood pressure.

"Let's do this." I grinned. "Let's make it public."

Nate released a breath and looked down at the ring. "So do I…do I have to wait to wear it? Until—"

"I think you've waited long enough," I said. "Kind of feels like we should've done this ages ago."

Nate casually swiped at his eye. "Wow. This is…" He turned the ring between his fingers. "I'm still completely blown away."

Cam grinned. "Do you need some time to think about—"

"Fuck no." Nate laughed softly. "I'm pretty sure my brain went *yes* as soon as I opened the box."

We all exchanged glances and smiled.

He pushed the box away and held up the ring. "So, who gets to put it on?"

"I'm pretty sure we can help you with that." I took his left hand and brought it up to my lips. "Cam?"

"Got it." Cam held out his hand, and Nate—with the slightest tremor in his fingers—set the ring on Cam's palm.

While I gently grasped Nate's hand, Cam slid the ring on his third finger.

"Holy shit," Nate breathed.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"It feels…" He exhaled, shaking his head as he closed his hand around mine, the gold cool against my skin.

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and kissed his temple. "We love you, Nate. You're as much a part of this family as we are."

"Thank you," he whispered.

He held up his hand, ring gleaming in the overhead light. I put mine next to it. Then Cam added his. Surreal. Just…surreal to see all of our hands lined up with matching gold rings.

Nate cleared his throat. "So do the superpowers kick in right away, or do we have to wait for the ceremony?"

We all burst out laughing.

"You're such a tool." I chuckled, gathering him in my arms.

"Takes one to know one, right?"

"Something like that." I pulled him close and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. I let him go, and it was Cam's turn for a long kiss.

"You know." Cam craned his neck toward the oven. "We've still got about twenty minutes."

He met Nate's gaze. Then mine.

And all three of us grinned.

No one had to say another word because I was pretty sure we were all thinking the same thing—*upstairs. Now*.

On the way up to the bedroom, and even as we pulled each other down onto the giant bed, peeling clothes off and kissing and turning each other on, I couldn't believe we'd made it to this point. At the same time, it made perfect sense—life without Cam or Nate was completely wrong.

People would have opinions about it. The press would no doubt rake Nate over the coals and speculate about Cam and me.

But I had a ring on my hand that matched the ones on Nate's hand and on Cam's.

And after all the hell we'd put ourselves through to get here?

I couldn't think of anything else that mattered.

What He Left Behind

L.A. Witt

What He Left Behind

Josh Carver would do anything for Michael Adair, his childhood best friend. In the five years since Michael finally left his abusive ex-partner, Josh and his husband Ian have helped him leave that horrific past behind him. Michael seems to have adjusted well enough…until he admits he's afraid to date because the abuse has left him terrified of physical intimacy.

Josh is stunned again when Ian proposes a solution—Josh can help Michael learn to enjoy sex again. It isn't like it would be the first time. After all, Josh and Michael lost their virginity to each other years ago.

Michael hesitates, but then takes him up on the idea. It isn't long before Ian's getting involved too… and it's all fine and dandy until emotions come into play that threaten their friendship, as well as Josh and Ian's marriage.

Warning: Contains three guys who will do anything for each other, a hot tub that's always the right temperature, and a cat with an attitude problem.

This 73,000 word novel was previously published.

Chapter One

"Dr. Klein asked me out."

Michael isn't looking at me when he says it. He's across the dimly lit booth, staring down at the piece of bread he's been absently shredding for the last few minutes. Brow taut, shoulders hunched, he hasn't said much since he showed up for lunch, and I knew something had to be wrong. I just wasn't expecting…that.

"Oh." Now I'm mutilating a piece of bread too. "You said no, didn't you?"

The long, resigned release of breath confirms it. Michael sets the bread down, brushes a few crumbs off his fingers and sits back against the fake leather cushion. "I said no."

My heart sinks. He's had the most adorable crush on that doctor for months, and ever since he found out the guy was gay, he's been trying to work up the courage to ask him out. From the sound of it, the doctor—a vet who spends one or two days a week in the clinic where Michael works—has reciprocated pretty hard, and they started flirting cautiously a few weeks ago. I can't blame either of them. The doc is one of those smoking-hot rugged guys with a little gray around the edges, and Michael… Well, Michael is gorgeous. Even my husband ogles him, though he admittedly does have a thing for redheads, and we both get a little breathless at the sight of a man in scrubs.

But Dr. Klein asked, and Michael said no, and I don't know what to say. I didn't know what to say the last couple of times this scenario played out. It happened with another vet tech who worked in the same office last year—they flirted, they danced around the obvious, and when the guy had finally suggested a drink after work, Michael balked. He never has given me a straight answer about that one. Or about the FedEx driver he'd played the same game with for the better part of a year before the vet tech came along.

Except I have my suspicions, and I hope like hell that this time and those other two times were just cold feet, not a throwback to Michael's awful past.

But what the hell do I say?

Come on, Josh. Say something*, for fuck's sake.*

Treading carefully, I ask, "What changed your mind about him?"

Michael leans forward again, pressing his elbow onto the table and kneading the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "God, I'm so stupid."

With anyone else, I'd have thought—and quite possibly said—that yes, dude, you are stupid. Dr. Klein is one of those guys who can turn

every head in a room that's already packed full of hot men. Plus he's a vet who's notorious for being extra gentle and kind with animals, and if there's a better way to Michael's heart, I don't know what it is.

I fold my arms on the edge of the table and try to narrow some of the distance between us. It's a struggle not to reach past the abandoned bread basket and put a reassuring hand on his arm. Even after all these years, it's hard to remember that Michael doesn't like being touched. That's one of the biggest tragedies of his past—he'd always been touchy-feely in an endearing kind of way, and it still hurts to see him recoil from even the slightest brush of human contact.

"You're not stupid. What happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened." He drops his hand again, and he meets my eyes. "I just couldn't do it."

I swallow. "Have you talked to Dr. Hamilton about it?"

Michael flinches and drops his gaze. The bread is back in his line of sight again, and when he starts ripping crumbs off it once more, his hands are unsteady. Were they earlier? I can't remember now and wish I'd paid attention.

"I left her a message," he whispers. "I doubt she'll be surprised."

"Why?" I chew my lip. "I mean, is this about…" …*the whole reason you have a therapist in the first place?* "Is it…"

"Steve?"

My hackles go up at the sound of that asshole's name. "Yeah."

"Isn't everything about him these days?" Michael's voice is bitter, and as if for emphasis, he tears off a chunk of crust and tosses it into the basket. Then he shakes his head and sits back again, dusting more crumbs off his fingers. "Every time I think I'm past all that…"

"Dr. Klein is nothing like Steve, though."

"Neither was Steve when we first started dating," he mutters.

The booth is silent for a moment. I still don't know what to say, and Michael's lost in his own thoughts.

Right then, the ponytailed blonde waitress appears with our food and asks with a huge grin, "Okay, who had the veggie stir fry?"

Michael musters something in the neighborhood of a smile. "Me."

She sets the plate down in front of him and turns to me. "So this pesto chicken must be for you."

I nod, but as she lays it on the table, my stomach twists. I could've sworn I was starving when I got here. "Thanks."

"Can I get either of you anything else?"

Michael and I exchange glances, and I shake my head. To the waitress, he says, "No, we're fine. Thank you." Another smile, this time a bit more pronounced, not to mention forced.

"Okay. Enjoy!"

With that, she's gone, and we're alone with two plates of food. Michael eyes his. I poke at mine with a fork. Well. So much for that idea. There are days when I can joke with Michael that we should start a new weight loss program. All someone has to do is say Steve's name at the table, and everyone will lose their appetites.

"I said 'Steve' at every other meal, and lost twenty pounds in two weeks!"

Some days, Michael thinks that's funny in a twisted sort of way. Today, I'm pretty sure his sense of humor has gone in the same direction as his appetite, and I don't blame him one bit. Not if that asshole is still interfering with his life after all this time. It's been five goddamned years since the night I picked him up at the emergency room for the last time, when he said he was really leaving this time and he'd actually stuck to it, and I swear there are days when Steve has a tighter hold on him now than he did back then.

The silence wears on. Michael manages to take a few bites of his pasta, so I make myself eat a bit too. We both have to go back to work after all, and if I know Michael, he's been sucking down coffee and nothing else since his alarm went off. Just like me.

Michael lays his fork down and sits a bit straighter. My mouth goes dry. I quickly take a drink to wash down the pesto chicken before he speaks. At least I know him well enough that I can tell from a mile away if he's about to say something important, and he knows me well enough to wait until I won't aspirate my iced tea.

Once I'm safe from drowning, he finally asks, "You want to know what keeps stopping me from going out with anyone?"

I'm scared to death this will be as hard to hear as the myriad confessions he's made in the years since Steve, especially if it's taken this long for him and his therapist to pry it out of his psyche, and my stomach churns as I nod.

Michael drops his gaze and stares at his food for a moment. He takes a deep breath, and I hold mine.

"Dr. Hamilton's helped me through a lot of the bullshit," he says. "I can separate everything Steve did from what a real relationship should be. I've sorted most of it out, and I've let enough of it go that I think I can actually be part of a functional, healthy relationship again."

He pauses, and I gnaw my lip. The unspoken "But…" hangs in the air. It's making my hands twitchy, so I slide my wedding ring back and forth over my knuckle to keep them occupied.

"I think I'm okay for almost everything about a normal relationship." He meets my eyes, and the faintest shine in his sends my heart into my feet. His voice barely carries across the booth as he says, "Except I am completely fucking terrified to have sex."

My jaw drops. Immediately, there's a lump in my throat. Dozens of memories flash through my mind—our first time the summer after high school, the night we blew off our own community college graduation, that winter when he fucked me back to life after an overly dramatic breakup—and I can't breathe. That son-of-a-bitch ex-boyfriend of his had dimmed the light in Michael's eyes for a good long time, and he'd put him through more hell than anyone—least of all someone as sweet and gentle as Michael—deserves to go through, but knowing he also took away that passionate, playful, sensual side is… I can't fit it in my head. Even when Michael was young and inexperienced, he'd been so confident and full of life. He didn't care if he performed well, or if he was porn-star perfect. That first time, I'd been all nerves and fear, and he'd seemed so…

Unbreakable.

And now he's gazing at me from across this booth, the faintest hint of tears in his eyes, with his confession still ringing in my ears.

"Michael…" His name comes out as a pathetic whisper. I shake myself and meet his gaze again. "You never told me…" As soon as the words are out, I want to take them back, but he winces before I can, and now it's harder than ever not to reach for his arm. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't expecting that."

"I know." Michael starts picking at his food again, probably just looking for something to do. "I never told anyone except Dr. Hamilton."

There's a million questions on the tip of my tongue, and I bite down on the one that desperately wants to slip out: *What did that son of a bitch do to you?*

Because I know Michael—if he's willing to tell me, he'll do it without prompting. Trying to drag an answer out of him is the quickest way to get him to clam up and shut down. Dr. Hamilton has almost certainly had her work cut out for her.

And I don't ask, because I'm afraid of the answer. The bruises have long since healed, and he doesn't have panic attacks like he used to. The jagged scar beside his eyebrow is the only visual reminder left aside from how hard it still is for him to make eye contact these days. I'm sure he still has a few scars beneath his clothes. I knew about the physical and emotional abuse, and I've wondered plenty of times if that extended to the bedroom, but he's insisted all these years that it didn't.

What have you been carrying alone all this time?

Michael takes a long swallow of Coke and sets the glass down, the tinkling ice giving away the slight tremor in his hand. "I'm sorry. I should have told—"

"Don't you dare apologize," I whisper, struggling *hard* not to reach

for him. “I’m always here, and I always have been, but you don’t have to tell me anything.”

“I know.” He sweeps his tongue across his lips. “It actually took me a long time to even tell Dr. Hamilton. And she’s helped me through so much, but this…” Michael shakes his head. “The thing is, I really do like Dr. Klein. A lot, but how do I put this far enough behind me to not be a goddamned basket case with him? Or with anyone else?”

“What does Dr. Hamilton suggest?”

He shrugs. “She thinks this might be outside of her expertise. She’s tried, but so far, we’re just not getting anywhere. She’s said a sex therapist might be the way to go.” In the dim light, Michael’s cheeks color. “But I’m… I mean, it took me this long to even tell you. I don’t know if I can talk about this with a complete stranger, you know?” Through gritted teeth, he adds, “Maybe if I were comfortable with that, I could stomach the idea of sleeping with someone I’ve never touched before. But I can’t. So why would I…” He waves a hand and shakes his head.

“Shit,” I breathe. “I am so sorry, Michael.” It sounds so fucking useless. Especially directed at someone like Michael, who’s got every right to be jaded when it comes to apologies.

“I’m just afraid…” He chews his lip. “I’ve gone out with a few guys over the years, and the second things got physical, I freaked out. It’s not as bad as it used to be.” He shudders. “The first time, fuck, I probably scarred that guy for life.”

“What happened?”

“I panicked.” He meets my eyes, and his eyebrows pull together slightly, as if to silently add, *Don’t make me go into detail*.

“Was it better the other times?”

“Better, but not…” He rubs the bridge of his nose again. “There’s just this wall up. And I don’t know how to get over that wall with someone without killing the mood completely, you know?”

I force back that lump in my throat. I remember all too well stumbling over mental obstacles and being scared to death I’d disappoint a guy because I was too nervous and too inexperienced and too freaked out. And I got over those obstacles because of Michael. He was patient, and reassuring, and coaxed me over each and every one of those barriers until we were having the kind of sex I thought existed only in pornos.

“It pisses me off,” Michael goes on. “I mean, every time I think I’ve left that asshole in the past, something else comes up and reminds me of him. I love sex. Well, loved it. And now, I can’t even…” He swallows and looks in my eyes again. “I used to get turned on if a guy put his hand on my leg under the table. The last time I went out with

someone? He just brushed my leg with his knee, and my skin started crawling. I spent the rest of the evening thinking he was going to touch me for real. When I bailed on him because I was"—he makes air quotes—"feeling kind of sick, it wasn't entirely a lie."

"Jesus."

Michael holds my gaze, but then he shakes his head and picks up his fork again. Stabbing at his food, he sighs. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dump all this on you. And you've probably got to get back to work pretty soon."

I glance at the clock on the wall behind him. Yeah, I'm cutting it close, and technically I should bail in the next ten minutes, but I think my boss will understand if I get back late this one time. "I'm not in a hurry."

Michael spears a piece of penne with his fork. "Thanks."

"Any time."

His eyes flick up for a second. We've had this conversation before —Michael knows damn well I mean it when I say I'm always here for him. Day or night, no questions asked. I'd move mountains for him, and right now, I wish like hell I could move this one.

"Have you thought about just going out with the guy?" I ask. "Maybe tell him up front that you prefer to take things slow?"

Michael nods. He nibbles his lunch, and his eyes are unfocused as if he's lost in thought. Then he takes a drink and says, "Honestly? That just makes it worse."

"How so?"

"Because moving slowly is still moving. We'll still get there." He chases another piece of tomato around the edge of his plate. "And I'll be sweating bullets the entire fucking time." He stabs the tomato and nearly puts his fork right through the ceramic. "Sometimes I think it would be better to just dive into bed with a stranger and get it over with."

My neck prickles. "That…doesn't sound like a healthy way to approach it."

He arches an eyebrow. "Got any better ideas?"

I hold his gaze. He holds mine.

And no, I haven't got any better ideas.

Chapter Two

By the time I get home from work at ten after seven, I'm starving. If traffic had moved even a little bit slower, I'm pretty sure I would've started eyeballing the steering wheel or the passenger seat's upholstery.

And yet at the same time, the thought of food makes me gag. I've been reeling all day from what Michael told me over lunch, and that's to say nothing of all the things he didn't tell me. I know just enough about that hellish relationship to be able to fill in the blanks. As I'm getting out of my car, a thought smacks me in the back of the head: What if one of those times I met Michael at the ER, when he was shaken and bloody, it had been after Steve—

No. No. No.

Not going there. Not tonight. Not if I ever want to sleep again.

I force my mind to shift gears as I head inside. The instant I open the door from the garage to the foyer, Ariel, our young boxer, comes thundering in from the kitchen, whipping the walls and her own sides with her long tail.

"Ariel," Ian says firmly from the kitchen, and she hurries back the way she came. I follow her. In the kitchen, Ariel skids to a halt, sliding a little on the linoleum before dropping onto her haunches. He taps his thigh, and she moves to his side at the stove, where she sits again. "Good girl." Her tail thumps against the cabinet, and he pets her head. To me, he says, "Hey you. How was your day?" Then he gestures at the stove. "Hungry?"

"Not bad, and very." I greet him with a kiss before I glance at the pot and the skillet, but as soon as I see the food, my gut tightens. It looks and smells wonderful—Ian cooks like a pro—but I'm not sure I can stomach much of anything tonight. Not even when the last real meal I had was the one he cooked last night.

"Hey." Ian tugs my belt loop and brings me closer. "You okay?"

There's that fucking lump in my throat again. No. No, I'm not okay. Because Michael isn't okay. And I don't know what to say to him, and I don't know what to do short of hunting Steve down and strangling him with my bare hands and—

"Josh." Ian cups my face, drawing me out of my thoughts. "What's wrong?"

I lower my gaze. Ariel is staring up at me with those huge brown eyes, her tail still beating against the cabinet, so I hold out my hand. She licks my fingers, and her tail slows.

Daddy, what's wrong?

I sigh and pet her, prompting a little more tail thumping.

Ian kisses my cheek. “Why don’t I dish everything up, and we can talk while we eat?”

Wordlessly, I nod. That’ll at least buy me a moment to collect my thoughts, assuming our dog’s innocent expression doesn’t break me down first. Fuck. I haven’t been this shaken since the first time I met a bruised, stitched-up Michael at the ER. It’s been five years since Steve laid a hand on him, but the wound feels fresh to me because, up until today, I hadn’t known. I hadn’t fucking known.

What did he do *to you, Michael?*

Ian dishes everything up, and we sit down at the kitchen table. Ariel lies down beside Ian, ever hopeful of a tossed table scrap, and Rosie, our aloof Siamese, perches on the windowsill, glaring at me like she always does. She’s definitely Ian’s cat, because she can’t stand me. I decided a long time ago she must blame me for her stupid name. I’ve tried explaining that it was the shelter who named both her and the dog, but to no avail—she hates me.

The thought can’t even make me chuckle tonight, and I just sigh and try to eat.

From across the table, Ian watches me, but he doesn’t say anything.

I shift uncomfortably. “I had lunch with Michael. And he…”

Ian pulls in a sharp breath and sits straighter. He knows me, and he knows what it means when I’m like this after I’ve had lunch with Michael. The details are the only variables.

I hesitate. Michael knows I talk to Ian about these things. In fact, he encourages it.

“You shouldn’t have to internalize it all,” he said to me a few years back. *“And I trust you both.”*

So I take a deep breath, and I tell my husband everything Michael told me over lunch.

When I’m finished, Ian sits back against the chair just like Michael did earlier. “Oh my God.” He shakes his head and starts absently petting Ariel. “I know I’ve said it before, but there is a special place in hell for that fucker.”

“Yeah, there is.”

We exchange glances. That special place in hell has been reserved since long before we found out about this development.

Neither of us says much more. In fact, neither of us says much of anything while we eat. And damn it, I’m still ravenous, but it’s a struggle to eat. Ian seems to be having a tough time too, and pasta is one of his favorite things on the planet. Except the Steve diet works pretty well on him too.

I have to wonder how Steve can sleep at night. Or eat. Or just

breathe. He'd been such a charmer in the beginning, but my God, the poison in that man is almost visible to the naked eye after a while. During the five long years he had Michael under his thumb, that asshole committed a lot of unforgivable sins, and people still ask Michael why on earth he stayed for so long if it was really that bad. Of course, anyone who's ever been in an abusive relationship knows that walking away is easier said than done. The threats, the manipulation —all of it holds on to the victim like a fucking choke chain.

One chain in particular kept Michael firmly within Steve's grasp—his dog. Any time Michael stepped out of line or so much as hinted about leaving, Steve knew damn well all he had to do was threaten to hurt Cody. Once, after a particularly bad fight, the asshole actually left with the dog and came back without him. He let Michael believe for days that he'd sold him to a dog-fighting ring before finally, after deciding Michael was repentant enough, bringing him home from his brother's house.

In Ian's eyes, that alone cemented Steve's place in the deepest, darkest pits of hell. Ian's an animal lover just like Michael, and even joking about hurting one makes him see red. Actually threatening to do it? Especially to manipulate someone who once literally jumped into a frozen lake to save a dog? Unforgivable.

I've always agreed with him, and this new revelation about the things that happened in that house makes me wish there were some even deeper and darker pits in hell. Steve deserves nothing less than the worst the devil can offer.

After a while, Ian asks, "Is Michael's therapist helping? With… um…"

"She's trying."

"I guess there's no easy way to come back from something like that. Sitting and talking to someone probably helps, but only to a point."

I nod. "Yeah. I can't imagine what else she can do, though."

"I can't imagine what else anyone can do."

Our eyes meet. Ian sighs and shakes his head. We both continue making a half-assed effort to get through the wonderful meal he cooked. Of course I don't know what the answer is for Michael—I don't even know how to salvage what should have been a pleasant dinner.

Eventually, we've both eaten enough to tide us over until breakfast—or first coffee, as Ian calls it—and we start cleaning up. All the while, I feel like I'm in a haze, part of my mind still stuck in this afternoon's conversation as if my foot's stuck in concrete. Every now and again, as we wash the dishes so we can settle in to watch TV, I manage to forget, but that uncomfortable feeling beneath my rib cage

reminds me all isn't right in the world. When I notice it, I remember, and the thoughts start bombarding my brain all over again. I don't foresee a lot of sleep happening tonight.

As we often do, Ian and I spend the evening curled up on the couch with the dog and cat. There isn't much on—mostly reruns and the news—but it's enough to keep us mildly entertained. Or at least distracted. Ian doesn't laugh much, even when it's one of the good sitcoms. I don't either.

I kind of regret telling him what Michael told me—doesn't seem fair to ruin his evening too. But he'd have dragged it out of me sooner or later. Unlike Michael, I crack under interrogation, and Ian's a schoolteacher. He can pry a confession out of the most tight-lipped fourteen-year-old. His own husband? Cake walk.

Still, it bugs me to think of Ian sitting there with the same sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

I want to text Michael and make sure he's okay. Maybe he's worked up the courage to call Dr. Klein and say he's reconsidered, and yes he would like to go out sometime. I'd like to think that's what he's doing right now, or that they're already on an impromptu date somewhere, but I know Michael. If he's afraid enough of sex to admit he's afraid, then it's not something he's going to shake off with a deep breath and a phone call.

But what *will* it take? I refuse to believe the damage is permanent. Yeah, maybe Michael had turned out to be more breakable than I'd imagined, but not irreparably so. That's just not possible.

Around ten thirty, Ian clicks off the TV. The animals jump off the couch, and we follow, though we're both a little slower. Not that we're old or anything, but a couple of tired thirty-somethings don't quite spring to life the way a year-old boxer and a sassy Siamese do. Especially not this late on a Thursday evening.

From there, it's the same routine as every night. Ian takes the dog out one last time. I top off the cat's food and water while she tries to kill me with her mind. Then the animals commandeer as much of the bed as they can while we brush our teeth and Ian takes out his contacts. For two guys who hadn't caught each other's names until after we'd seen each other's proverbial O-faces, a decade later we've slipped pretty comfortably into the quiet domestic life. And they say you can't find love in a bathhouse.

Those days are behind us now, though, and after all the drama of our wilder years, we're both quite content.

We rearrange the animals and climb into bed.

Ian doesn't kill the light, though. "So, I was thinking."

I shift onto my side and drape an arm over him. "About?"

"Michael."

His name sends a jolt through me, jarring my already tense stomach.

Ian wraps his arm around my shoulders. “About his, um, situation.”

“Yeah?”

Ian studies me for a moment. “Maybe you can help him.”

I blink. “How?”

“He trusts you. He’s…” Ian hesitates. “He’s been with you. Maybe you’re what he needs right now.”

I stare at him because I’m not entirely certain I heard him correctly. “Come again?”

Ian takes my hand, lacing our fingers together on his stomach. “We both know you’re still attracted to him.”

Heat rushes into my cheeks. “Well, yeah, but that doesn’t… I’m not trying to… Ian, I’m—”

“Shh.” He squeezes my hand, and a smile plays at his lips. “I’m not making any accusations. You’re attracted to him. I have a crush on my boss.” He shrugs. “It’s life. We’re married, not castrated.”

“True.” I’m still guarded, though. “But we agreed to have a closed relationship.”

“We did. Except that was before either of us knew what happened to Michael.”

I’m still staring at him, struggling to comprehend that we’re even having this conversation.

“Josh, he’s your best friend. No one else in the world is as close to him as you are *and* has been physically intimate with him.” Ian traces the side of my thumb with his. “Under the circumstances, I’d say what you might be able to do for him trumps any need we have for monogamy.”

“But, I mean, even if you’re right, I don’t want to do some kind of damage to us.”

“You wouldn’t. I’m not suggesting you cheat on me. I know about it, and I’m endorsing it—it’s not cheating.” He brings my hand up and kisses the backs of my fingers. “You’d be helping him get his confidence back and undo some of the damage that motherfucker did to him.”

A shudder runs through me as my mind’s eye tries to show me what might have happened to Michael back then, and I tamp those thoughts down. “I don’t… I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Talk to him.” Ian squeezes my hand again. “See if he’s even on board with the idea, and then play it by ear.”

I hold his gaze. “You’re really sure about this.”

“If it means getting him back to a better place so he can find a better relationship?” Ian nods. “Absolutely.”

I chew the inside of my cheek. “What if I make things worse for him?”

“Josh.” Ian releases my hand and cups my cheek. “You’re the sweetest and most generous man I’ve ever been with. You and I both know you’d never push him further than he wanted to go, and you would *never* hurt him. There is literally nothing I can imagine you doing that would do more damage.”

“Still. He’s already gotten hurt so badly…”

“And I couldn’t imagine him being in better hands.”

I’m not so confident, but Ian is right about one thing—there’s no way in hell I would deliberately do anything to hurt Michael any more than I would do anything to hurt Ian. It’s the inadvertent stuff that worries me.

“Talk to him,” Ian says again. “Who knows? He might not even be interested. But if he is, just set rules and limits, take it slow, and maybe it’ll help.”

Fair enough. That I can do. Though I’m not completely sure how to broach that subject. Carefully, I guess. Still, despite my worries, I do feel better knowing there might be something I can actually do to help Michael get back to a better place. *Might*.

I meet Ian’s gaze and smile. “You’re amazing. You know that?”

He laughs softly and kisses the tip of my nose. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I would.” I run my fingers through his hair. “Any rules?”

Ian seems to mull it over for a moment, but then shrugs. “I trust you. And him.” He pauses. “Just, you know, be honest with me about anything that’s going on. Not necessarily details, just…”

“Just be honest.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I will. I promise.”

Ian smiles. He lifts his head and kisses me softly. “We should get some sleep. Let me know how it goes when you talk to him.”

“You’ll be the first to hear.” I kiss him once more and then settle onto my pillow. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Chapter Three

It's almost six o'clock in the evening, and I still haven't contacted Michael. I tell myself it's because I've been wrapped up in paperwork and PowerPoint, and that I don't want to bother him at work, but that's bullshit.

Sitting in my cubicle beneath the fluorescent lights, playing with my phone, I want to text him, but I don't. I can't. Fact is, I can't figure out what I want to say to him, or how to say it, or if I really should follow through with Ian's suggestion. What would that even mean, anyway? Friends with therapeutic benefits?

And regardless of what we call it, I'm worried sick that this could get complicated. Sex was never complicated for us, but there was never so much riding on it. During those times when we'd fooled around, neither of us had ever been otherwise attached, never mind married to one or traumatized by another. Over the years, we'd wandered in and out of each other's beds in between relationships, but it was never a good time for us to pursue something more than sex together. One of us was coming off a breakup, or the other was too tied up with real life to even think of anything more serious.

When life calmed down and we were mature enough to know which way was up, Michael was already happily in a relationship. By the time he'd rebounded from that breakup, I met someone new. We leap-frogged like that all the way through college, until I started working and Michael was in vet school, and then came Ian, and Michael had known before I did that I'd met the man I'd marry. He was the one who told me I was being a dumbass when Ian and I broke up over something stupid, and he was the one who helped us get back together, and damn if he didn't earn his spot as best man at our wedding.

Sometimes I catch myself fantasizing about the sex we used to have, but I never think of him as the one that got away. Just very fond, very hot memories. My relationships with both Ian and Michael turned out exactly the way they should have—I wouldn't trade my husband for anything, and I have the best friend any man could ask for. The best friend who gave me all the confidence I have in the bedroom.

The best friend who's lost all that confidence because of the asshole he started dating six months after I got married.

The best friend who might be able to regain that confidence with my help, if I'm willing to slip off my wedding ring, get into his bed for the first time in over a decade, and…

And no, this can't possibly get complicated.

Cursing under my breath, I rest my elbows on my desk and rub my eyes. This is worse than the helpless feeling I had when there was nothing I could do for Michael. Doing nothing beats the hell out of doing something to fuck him up even more.

Finally, I send a text, but it's not to Michael.

Are you absolutely sure about this?

Ian's definitely home by now, likely grading papers. Hopefully he's in his office or at the kitchen table—if he's kicked back on the couch like he sometimes is, then he's probably got either the cat or all fifty pounds of Ariel in his lap, and his phone might be out of reach.

Within thirty seconds, though, the response comes through: *100% sure*.

And right after that one: *I trust you*.

And he needs me, my brain adds, because it's so fucking helpful.

I'm not nearly as confident about this as my husband, but there is one thing I'm unshakably sure about—how much I want to do something for Michael.

I glance at the clock, and it's five minutes till six. If I want to see him tonight, we need to make a decision soon, because traffic going in his direction will be hellish if I don't get on the road in the next twenty minutes.

So, with the clock inching toward quitting time, I text him: *You busy tonight?*

I hit send and pray for a response of *sorry, got a date with Dr. Klein*.

As I log off the computer, gather my jacket and keys and wait for the minute hand to hit the twelve, I keep an eye on my phone. At six, I leave my desk, and I'm halfway to the parking garage when the phone vibrates.

Already home. Want to come by?

Already home? But it's—

Oh, right. He sometimes has Friday afternoons off after his therapy appointments.

Perfect. This isn't a conversation we need to have out in public.

I text back, *I'll be there as soon as I can.*

And I hope to God the drive gives me enough time to figure out what to say.

~*~

I park in the space beside Michael's car and take the stairs up to his apartment. My heart's going like crazy, and I've finally worked out exactly how to broach this subject. It'll still be awkward and might make him balk, but at least I can get enough words out for him to

consider the idea without making either of us feel like an ass if he declines.

When I reach his door, I pause with my hand on the knob, take a deep breath and go inside—he doesn't like when people knock if he knows they're coming because it pisses off his dog.

"In the kitchen," he calls out.

Cody comes loping down the hallway, so I crouch and open my arms. He jumps up, tail wagging so hard it's shaking his whole body, and I keep my chin up just enough to prevent him from licking my face. That doesn't stop him from trying, of course.

"Cody," Michael says, chuckling. "Get a grip. You just saw him the other day."

"Hey. Hey. He adores me. Don't stand in his way."

Michael just laughs, and when I look up at him, he's standing at the end of the hall with that bright smile on his face, and…

And my mind goes blank.

Absolutely. One hundred percent. Blank.

I came here to talk to him, and I remember why, but the words, they're all gone. Someone straight up unplugged the server, and now I'm staring at Michael like an idiot.

He's staring back at me, his green eyes doing nothing to help me reboot my brain.

Smile fading, he cocks his head. "What?"

Of course he can read me like a book, even when there's nothing on the pages. I gently nudge Cody back, pet him a little and stand up.

Michael's gaze is fixed on me. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I absently brush a few strands of dog hair off my shirt. "I kind of wanted to talk about some things."

His eyebrows lift slightly. "Okay." He glances over his shoulder, then looks at me again. "Coffee?"

"Sure. Yeah. Thanks." Maybe that'll give me time to remember *how* to talk to him.

With Cody hot on my heels, I follow Michael into his kitchen.

While Michael pours coffee, I'm trying hard not to wring my hands, so I play with my wedding ring instead. Somewhere inside my skull are the words I rehearsed in the car, and I rack my brain, searching frantically, but…nothing.

And then there we are, standing on opposite sides of the narrow kitchen, coffee cups in hand. Cody sits between us, tail wagging as he looks at him, then me, then him again. Apparently we're boring, though, because he finally gets up and trots out of the room, tags jingling and nails clicking on the linoleum.

Alone, Michael and I drink in silence. I know the coffee hasn't made it into my system yet, but I'm jittery anyway. Placebo effect,

nerves—who the fuck knows. My mental script is irretrievably gone, though, so apparently, if I'm going to give this performance, I get to wing it.

I set my coffee cup on the counter and face him. "So, I've been thinking about what we talked about yesterday. A lot."

His cheeks darken and his gaze drops. "I'm sorry." He plays with the handle on his coffee cup. "I was afraid it might upset you. I shouldn't have unloaded it all on you like that."

"No, no. It's okay." I gulp. "To get right to the point, I think maybe I can help."

Michael's eyes flick up. "Help? How?"

"Um…"

And now we all remember why Josh didn't last very long in drama classes once they got to the improv part…

Michael sets his coffee down and faces me again. "What do you have in mind?"

I rest my hands on the counter's edge, resisting the urge to drum my fingers.

"Josh?" Michael tilts his head.

The pressure's on, and my heart pounds as my stomach threatens to crawl up my throat. The counter is getting damp from my sweaty palms. *Come on, come on…*

Finally, I blurt out, "Do you trust me?" The question startles me, and Michael stares wide-eyed at me.

"What?"

"Do—" I clear my throat. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life," he whispers. "You know that."

"I do. Yeah. I just…" *Well, Josh?* I scrub a clammy hand over my face and exhale. "I was asking because…" *Because I'm an inarticulate idiot at the moment.*

"Josh." He inclines his head. "Whatever's on your mind, just say it." There's a note of uncertainty in his voice, the faintest hint of fear, and I realize he probably has zero idea what I'm trying to say or how it relates to what we talked about yesterday. This must be unnerving him something fierce, and knowing that turns my stomach even harder.

I hesitate, then push myself away from the counter and step a little bit closer. Not quite enough to make him draw back, but enough I can *almost* reach him if I try. "You know I'd never hurt you, right?"

His gaze still locked on me, Michael nods.

"Then maybe…" The words refuse to come easily. "Maybe I can…" Staring into his eyes like this, certain he'll duck away from me at any moment, I don't know how to say this.

Abruptly, Michael's spine straightens and his lips part. He raises

his eyebrows. “Is this conversation going where I think it’s going?”

“That depends. Where do you think it’s going?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “You first.”

Damn it.

I clear my throat again, this time to get the air moving. Not that it helps.

“Just say it,” he says. “Be blunt. You know I can handle it.”

Not this time, I don’t.

But I inhale slowly, hold his gaze and manage to say, “What if I can help you get more comfortable in bed with a man?”

There. It’s out. And I don’t think his eyes can possibly get any wider.

I hold my breath, wondering where the hell this conversation is going to go now that it’s back in his court.

Michael folds his arms. Not tightly, not defensively and not quite enough to mask the shiver that goes through him. I can’t tell if he’s repulsed, uncomfortable or…something else.

His voice is soft when he says, “Am I right in assuming you’re volunteering to be that man?”

There’s no point in backpedaling or sugarcoating, so I just nod.

He breaks eye contact and stares at the floor between us. Michael’s not easy to read, and right now, I have zero clue what he’s thinking. The creases between his eyebrows, the tension in his jaw and his shoulders—they tell me he’s deep in thought, but I can’t begin to guess what those thoughts are.

He lifts his gaze again. “So you want to sleep together until I can handle it again?”

“If you don’t want to, that’s—”

“I haven’t even gotten that far yet.” He waves a hand. “I’m still trying to figure out what you’re suggesting.”

“Fair enough.” I shift under his scrutiny. “The thing is, we’ve been together before. I’m not an unknown to you.”

He studies me but doesn’t speak.

I start playing with my ring again. “You know for a fact you can trust me in bed. Maybe that’ll get you past those walls that keep tripping you up with guys you *haven’t* been with.”

“But…what about…” He gestures at my hands. “What about Ian?”

My fingers stop with my ring just above my second knuckle. “This was actually his idea.”

Michael’s eyes are huge. “Seriously?”

I push the ring all the way on, then hook my thumbs in my pockets and hope that’s enough to keep me from being so goddamned fidgety. “His thought was that it might give you a chance to get your bearings before you find yourself considering getting into bed with

someone new."

This time, Michael makes no attempt to hide the shudder. "You guys want me to use you? For, what, therapy?"

I shrug. "If you want to look at it like that."

"I don't want pity sex."

"It's not pity any more than it was pity when you slept with me the first time."

Michael chews his lip again. "That was different."

"How? Because we were young and inexperienced?"

He doesn't answer immediately. Shaking his head, he says, "Look, I don't know about this."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

Michael's eyes flick toward me. Then toward the floor. "No. I don't. And don't get me wrong—I appreciate that you're willing to do this. I really do." He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "I just don't know. I have no idea what to think."

"Do you think it could help?"

He seems to mull it over for a long moment, and then half shrugs. "Maybe?" He meets my eyes, and his are filled with equal parts confusion and pain. "Part of me wants to take you to bed right now because I know that for me, you're the safest man on the planet. If I can't handle sex with you, then I might as well stay celibate."

My heart speeds up. "And the other part?"

He swallows hard, and he's staring at the floor again. "That part is scared to death of breaking that illusion."

It takes me a second to comprehend what he's saying, and when I do, my stomach drops into my feet. "You're afraid I'll do something to make you feel unsafe?"

"It's not rational. I know it's not." When he looks at me this time, his eyes plead with me to understand. "But that's the half that can't let go of the fact that I trusted Steve too." He rubs the back of his neck. "I know you'd never hurt me, Josh. I *know* that. But there was also a time when I *knew* I didn't really have Stockholm Syndrome, and that Steve really did mean well. It's kind of like being on a strong hallucinogen. Once you start seeing shit, you can't trust anything to be real."

Steve, you bastard.

"How can I prove it to you?" I ask softly.

Michael shakes his head and doesn't look at me. "If I knew…"

We're both still and silent for a long time. Then I cautiously come a little bit closer. He flinches, but his feet stay planted.

Slowly, carefully, I bring my hand up, and he's watching it, but he still doesn't back away. He's tense, and I'd bet money that the muscles in his neck are hard as steel right now, especially as I inch closer to

his face.

"You can say no," I whisper. "Say the word, and I'll back off."

Still eyeing my hand, he says just as quietly, "Duly noted."

And he still doesn't move. Not toward me, not away from me.

The pad of my forefinger *just* meets his cheekbone, and he flinches again. I do too, because it's heartbreaking to see this man jerking back from a gentle touch, whether it's mine or anyone else's. Especially since there was a time when my touch would have drawn him in—a brush of fingers on his cheek had the same effect as grabbing his shirt and pulling him to me. The instant we made contact, we were in each other's arms.

Now, as my fingertips graze his face again, he closes his eyes and takes slow, ragged breaths, and suddenly he's not a man on the verge of being drawn into a kiss or an embrace. An image of Ripley from *Alien* flashes through my mind—sweating, crying, inches from a monster, awaiting the inevitable, horrible outcome.

"I would never hurt you, Michael," I whisper.

"I know." He shudders hard. "I'm not afraid of you."

You're afraid of who your fucked-up psyche thinks I am.

"You and I are the only ones here."

He meets my eyes. "No, we're not."

Steve, if I ever fucking see you again…

"Do you want this?" I ask. "Do you want—"

"I want everything." His gaze drops again, and he exhales. "I want you to kiss me. I want you to fuck me." He shakes his head. "Goddammit, I want to be able to do this without being scared of someone who isn't here."

Fuck. What do I do?

I let my hand rest against his cheek and wait until the shudder passes. Until he's as relaxed as he's probably going to get. Then, "Do you want to stop?"

"No." He looks me in the eye again. "I don't want to stop."

Sliding my hand from his cheek into his hair, I draw us together, and—

A victory!

He touches my waist. Tentatively, his fingers twitching slightly on top of my shirt, but he's bridged the gap. When I wrap my other arm around him, his hand curves around to my back, and a moment later, his free hand materializes on my chest. I'm still—even with the other on my back, that hand could push me away, and I give him time to decide if it's what he really wants to do.

A fraction of an inch divides our lips, and I'm afraid to cross it. I can feel his uneven breaths, and I swear I can feel his heartbeat over my own, and I don't know if I should move in or back off or—

Michael's hand tightens around the front of my shirt.

He lifts his chin.

And presses his lips to mine.

My heart stops. Neither of us is moving or breathing. I'm sure he's going to jerk back at any moment, that the traumatized side of him is going to speak up with all its lies about me and every other man in the world, but he doesn't. He doesn't quite melt against me, doesn't quite relax, but in his own way, he does. The rigidity in his muscles starts to subtly ease. The hand on my back slides up a little, though I can't tell if it's a caress or if he's just resituating himself.

Gently, cautiously, I take over—holding him tighter, I tilt my head and nudge his lips with mine. They're taut at first, firm and closed, but gradually, they soften. And then they part. He takes in a long breath through his nose as I deepen the kiss.

He tugs at my shirt, and I'm so light-headed, it throws me off balance. We both stumble a bit, but thank God for Michael's tiny kitchen—his hip brushes the counter, and then I've got him pressed up against it, and he's not pushing me away or trying to stop or doing a damned thing except holding on to me and opening to my kiss. It's all I can do to keep our hips apart—one thing at a time—because I want nothing more than to press against him, feel every inch of him, and pray like hell that he suggests taking this into the other room. But no, no, not yet. Just this. I don't want to overwhelm him.

And that's a risk anyway, because the intensity of this kiss is like nothing I've ever experienced. Sure, there's arousal, and relief, and nerves, but there's something more. A hunger coming from him that I can't quite put my finger on. He's trembling, holding on to me and kissing me like his life depends on it. Not like he wants to drag me to bed, but like he's been waiting for this moment for so fucking long, he doesn't know what to do with it.

After God knows how long, I come up for air.

When our eyes meet, his are wet, and suddenly that intense hunger not only makes sense, it breaks my heart—it's the hunger of a man who's been starved for human affection for way, way too long.

He touches his forehead to mine, and my God, he's shaking. "That's…that's the first time I've kissed anyone since…"

"That's a damned shame." I pull him into a tighter embrace and stroke his hair. "Anything you want, Michael, just say the word."

He sighs. "I don't even know. Where to start. What I can handle."

"Anything. We can take it as slowly as you need to. Just like when we were kids—kiss a little. Maybe move up to going down on each other before—"

"*No.*" The sharpness of his voice startles me almost as much as the uncomfortable fidget. "Let's… I mean…" His voice softens. "Slow,

yeah. But oral. That's…"

I blink. "No oral?"

"No." He laughs bitterly. "Isn't that a switch? When I was a kid, I was terrified of being fucked, but totally down with sucking dick. Now I'd rather be dry-fucked than…"

Jesus. No one, not even Ian, has ever sucked my cock as enthusiastically as Michael did. I don't even want to know what Steve did to take that away from him, but I have a feeling I'll find out sooner or later.

"I'll follow your lead." I smooth his hair. "Anything you want, it's yours."

He wipes his eyes and then searches mine. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're my best friend."

"This is a little above and beyond for a friend, isn't it?"

"Would you do the same for me?"

Michael tenses, and for a second, I'm afraid of the answer. But then he says, "If anyone ever did to you what Steve did to me—" He cuts himself off and shakes his head, and then he pulls me in closer. Just before our lips meet, he murmurs, "He'd be a dead man," and then we're kissing again, and alongside that hunger for contact and affection, there's a taste of that passion he'd always had when we'd slept together in the past. That fierceness that came out in the form of desire, resulting in me getting pinned down and ridden hard, but could also come out as protectiveness.

"*He ever hurts you,*" Michael once warned me about one of my questionable boyfriends, "*he'll have me to answer to.*"

"*Do it again,*" he once growled to a guy who wouldn't back off in a club. "*I fucking dare you.*"

Michael breaks the kiss. Against my lips, he whispers, "To answer your question, yes. I'd do the same for you."

"I know you would." I kiss him again.

He draws back and swallows. "This is still a lot to handle. Up until just now, I hadn't even kissed anyone in years."

"There's no reason to rush any of it. We can take it a little at a time. Whatever you're comfortable with."

He's searching my eyes again. Then, tentatively, he pulls me into another kiss. Long, deep, just like the first one, as if the assurance that we can take all the time in the world has given him the confidence to have it all right now.

Anything you want, Michael. Anything.

He slides his hand down my back and draws me even closer, until our hips are *almost* touching, and I'm about to come unglued.

Jesus, I didn't think we'd get beyond a conversation tonight, but

now this.

His fingers press into my back. His erection brushes mine. Oh God. I want him so fucking—

"Shit." Michael jerks away and pushes me back, breaking the kiss, breaking the embrace, breaking contact. "I'm sorry, I—"

"What's wrong?" I give him some space instead of pinning him to the counter. "Did I do something—"

"No, no, no." He shakes his head and paces across the linoleum. "No. You didn't do anything wrong."

I watch him, at a loss for what to say. When his back is to me for a second, I quickly adjust the tight front of my jeans, but even alleviating that discomfort doesn't help much.

Michael stops, and he slumps against the counter across from me. "I think I need…" He rubs his hands over his face. "Fuck. I don't know what I need."

"Maybe some time. To get your head around everything."

"Maybe." He sighs. "Probably."

"Do you want me to go?"

He folds his arms tightly across his chest, as if he can't get warm. "I don't want you to go, no."

I study him, trying to read between the lines. "*Should* I go?"

At that, Michael deflates. He cups his elbow and lets his face fall into his hand. "Fuck. Probably. I don't know." Rubbing his eyes, he mutters, "I'm such a goddamned basket case."

"We're going to fix that. Together."

He lowers his hand, meeting my gaze. "Would you be offended if I said I was skeptical that I can be fixed?"

"Offended, no. But I disagree. You've come a long way in the last few years, and you didn't think you'd get that far."

His lips tighten, and he avoids my eyes as he shrugs. "I guess we'll see what happens."

"We don't have to—"

"I want to," he says quickly and quietly. "I can't even tell you how much it means that you're willing to do this, and I want to. I'm just…"

"Not sure how much it'll help?"

He nods.

"Only one way to find out."

He tenses again, flinching slightly.

"It doesn't have to be tonight." I curl my fingers at my sides, desperately wanting to reach for him, but afraid to make contact again. It's so weird, hesitating to touch him after we were just wrapped up in a long kiss. "If you need some time, I can go."

He nods but doesn't speak.

"Call me tomorrow. Even if you're not ready to talk, just, you

know, let me know you're doing all right."

"Okay. I will."

My keys jingle as I pull them from my pocket. There's got to be something I can say right now, but I'm drawing almost as much of a blank as I did when I broached this subject with Michael in the first place. So I just murmur, "I'm gonna go."

He nods again.

I spin my keys around my finger, and I still don't have a clue what to say, so I wish him a good night and head out of the kitchen.

I'm halfway down the hall when Michael says, "Josh."

I turn around, eyebrows up.

He hesitates, then meets my eyes from the kitchen doorway, and the subtlest ghost of a smile flickers across his lips. "Thank you."

Chapter Four

I should be relieved that Michael's open to Ian's suggestion, but I don't feel anything like relief as I head home. I'm still too shell-shocked by just how shaken Michael really is. Hearing that his terrible ex did things to him to make him afraid of sex is one thing.

Watching him tremble with fear over the idea of being touched? Seeing the tears in his eyes? Personally witnessing his hellish past turn a kiss into something that difficult?

I wince, my throat aching and my eyes stinging. Knowing how Michael was when he was still young and unscathed makes it even worse. I know firsthand how confident and bold he used to be in bed, and it hurts like hell to realize how much damage has been done.

Halfway back to my house and my husband, I'm struggling to focus on the road, so I pull over. As the engine idles, I rub my hands over my face. Memories are flooding my brain, and one in particular keeps surfacing. It's a memory that still wanders through my mind from time to time, and tonight, it won't be ignored. Not with Michael's kiss still fresh on my lips and the raw fear in his voice still thrumming along my nerve endings. There's no stopping it. The past wants to be heard, and it's either let it say its piece now, or wait until I'm lying in bed beside Ian.

So I close my eyes and let the memories come.

~*~

We'd been high school graduates for all of two weeks, so naturally, we owned the world. Driving around our hometown in beater cars, grinning like idiots every time we passed our alma mater, we were flying high and ready for the future to bring it on.

To save money, we were both going the community college route for the next two years. After that, Michael would start at the university for pre-vet, and then veterinary school. He had it all mapped out and planned down to the letter, from graduating at the top of his class to opening up a practice right there in town. My agenda wasn't quite so well plotted. I hoped—and my parents hoped—that the two community college years would be enough for me to figure out what I planned to study at the university, if anything. At the moment, I didn't have a clue.

It was no surprise that Michael had it together and I didn't. He always did. He was valedictorian. I barely squeaked by with a C+ average. He had his driver's license the day he turned sixteen. I failed

my driving test twice and finally passed it—barely—just before I turned eighteen. He'd known since kindergarten he wanted to be a vet. Nothing short of a fortune teller or a time machine was going to shed any light on what I wanted to do.

And Michael had figured out this whole gay business long before I had. He'd been out since our freshman year, and he'd confided in me that he'd known since fourth grade. Me, I'd been a bit slower to creep out of the closet. It took me until well into high school to accept that, no, those hard-ons for guys weren't going away and, no, I really wasn't into girls, no matter how much I wanted to be. Senior year, just before the homecoming game, I finally came out. Naturally, the first person I told was Michael.

He'd blinked a few times, shaken his head and finally said, "Okay. And?"

"What do you mean, 'and'?"

"I mean, I thought you had something big to tell me." He shrugged. "I've known you were gay since forever."

"You—seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I laughed. "It took me long enough to figure it out."

Michael turned a bit serious, though. "I thought about it. I've just —" He swallowed hard, and some color showed up in his cheeks as he avoided my eyes. "I didn't want you to think I was trying to persuade you."

"Persuade me? To what? Be gay?"

"Yeah."

"Why the hell would—"

He met my gaze. And held it. And held it. And—

Oh.

Oh.

I gulped. "Are you…"

The color in his cheeks deepened. "Would it weird you out if I told you I've wanted to kiss you since last year?"

Slowly, wordlessly, I shook my head. The guy I'd been fantasizing about for the last few months wanted to kiss me? After a long, silent moment, I said, "Do you still want to?"

Michael nodded. "A lot."

"Me too."

His eyebrows flicked up. "Have, um, have you ever kissed anyone before?"

"Not…" My face burned, and it was probably as red as his was a minute ago. "No guys."

"Girls?"

I nodded.

I thought he might be put off by that or think it was weird or something, but the corners of his mouth curled up and his eyes narrowed a little. As he curved his hand around the back of my neck, he said, “Good. Then you already know what to do.”

Before I could protest—*I know how to kiss a girl, not a guy, and I never said I was good at it!*—Michael kissed me.

And if I had any doubts left that I was gay, they evaporated the second our lips met. Kissing girls had been all right, but even the deepest, hottest kiss I’d ever shared with a girl didn’t curl my toes like this one did. Then Michael teased my lips apart with the tip of his tongue, and oh, yeah, I was definitely gay. This was easy. Effortless. My chin brushed his, and the lightly abrasive stubble—Michael had had to shave since junior high—was an unexpected turn-on. His lips were so soft, and that roughness was as masculine and hot as the short hair I couldn’t stop running my fingers through.

When we separated, I was dizzy and out of breath, and that had never happened before.

Yep. Definitely gay.

Michael licked his lips. “I’ve been waiting to do that for so long.”

“Good news,” I said. “You don’t have to wait to do it again.”

He didn’t wait.

We made out a few times after that. A few times? Hell, any time we could get away from the prying eyes of adult supervision. All through our senior year, any chance we had, we were kissing in cars, beneath the bleachers, in our bedrooms when we could be absolutely certain our parents wouldn’t walk in. Sometimes shirts came off, sometimes hands just slid under letterman jackets, and every once in a while, a brave palm would drift over the front of someone’s jeans, but it never went further than that. I was nervous and inexperienced, and Michael always seemed perfectly content to make out. He loved kissing, and so did I, so neither of us complained about doing *a lot* of kissing.

But now high school was over, and suddenly I was restless. I wasn’t bored, just curious. Adventurous. As if my newly minted diploma and my odometer hitting eighteen suddenly made me far too mature to still be a virgin.

Now that my mind was made up, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Every time I saw Michael, I was so turned on, I could barely speak. And when we finally got some time alone while his parents were at work, I was damn near shaking as we kissed and touched in his twin bed.

I couldn’t wait. Not one more minute.

I broke the kiss and managed to catch my breath enough to speak.

“I kind of want to go further this time.”

Michael looked me in the eye. “How much further?”

I licked my lips, my whole body tingling with excitement and nerves. “Let’s see where it goes.”

His grin drove my pulse skyward. “I’m in.”

“Took a whole lot of arm twisting, didn’t it?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Getting naked with you is not going to take any arm twisting.”

I should’ve laughed, but my breath caught. Getting naked together. Holy fuck. Yes. Now.

He met my eyes, and his laughter was gone, and I knew right then there was no turning back. This was happening, here and now, and I couldn’t wait to be completely overwhelmed by him.

Bring it on, Michael…

Oh, he brought it on. For the longest time, we made out like we always did, but it was different this time. We were breathing faster, holding each other tighter, like our bodies knew this was only the beginning.

Michael made the first move. He slid his hand between us, cupping my erection through my pants, and kneaded with his fingers. I groaned, and I rubbed against his hand, almost like I was fucking his palm, and it felt amazing. Especially when Michael lifted his head and kissed my neck. My neck and my dick weren’t connected, but the combination—his light little kisses and the pressure and friction below my belt—was insane.

“Why the hell didn’t we do this sooner?” he murmured. “This is *hot*.”

“I dunno. But don’t want to stop.”

He moaned something I didn’t understand, and when I ground against him harder, he gasped. That was when I realized I was pushing the back of his hand against his own cock. Maybe…

I lifted my hips and nudged his hand away. Before he could protest, I came back down, and now the only things separating my dick from his were two thick layers of denim, but holy fuck, we might as well have been rubbing naked skin against naked skin.

Michael pushed me onto my back, and he straddled me. As if having his rock-hard dick pressed against mine wasn’t enough to fuck with my head, he sat up and pulled off his shirt, revealing his gorgeous torso. The thick ridge below his belt made my mouth water—I’d felt him against me plenty of times, and I’d even stroked him through his pants before, but tonight, I wanted him out of those tight jeans.

“Clothes,” I said, wondering when I’d been reduced to single words. “Clothes…off.”

"Good idea. All of them off."

"Yeah. Now."

I shivered—naked in bed with Michael? Why *didn't* we do this sooner?

Never mind that. We were doing it now, and so far, it was well worth the wait.

Belts came unbuckled. Shirts came untucked. Every motion and gesture and touch seemed so…profound. Meaningful. Like every article of clothing we took off was a rite of passage, and in spite of my eighteen-year-old freshly graduated confidence, now I wasn't sure I was ready for any of this.

Michael, though. Michael was ready. He peeled off my clothes like he was unwrapping a gift and wanted to savor the experience—eager to see what was underneath but still in no hurry as he slid his hands under my shirt and pushed it over my head.

I liked the way his palms felt on my skin—warm, lightly calloused and still soft at the same time—and I wanted to know what it felt like to do the same to him, so I pushed his jeans and boxers over his hips. I was suddenly a lot less coordinated than I'd been before, probably because his hands were still on me, and getting his pants off was a lot more complicated than it was supposed to be.

But with some fumbling and struggling, we managed, and just like that, we were tangled up in each other like we'd been a million times before, but with nothing at all between us. Sometimes he was on top. Sometimes I was. Sometimes we were on our sides. Always touching, though, and my head spun as we explored each other from head to toe.

I'd never even thought about how amazing it would be just to feel his warm body against mine—everything from his body heat to the thin hair on his legs drove my senses crazy. I couldn't stop touching him. Everywhere. Not just his ass or his cock or those beautiful abs. *Everywhere*. The lines and grooves defining his muscles. Smooth planes and soft contours. I was so fucking turned on, I was sure with every brush of his hand that I was going to come, but apparently, months on end of long make-out sessions had done a thing or two for my stamina. Thank God—I didn't want this to be over any time soon.

Michael rolled me onto my back and straddled me again, and my spine arched as his cock rubbed against mine.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" He sounded as blown away as I felt.

"Yeah. Feels…" I moaned and closed my eyes. "Surprised I haven't come yet."

"Me too."

"For the record," I said, gazing up at him, "I have no idea what

I'm doing."

"Good." He leaned down and kissed beneath my jaw. "Then you won't know when I do the wrong thing."

I laughed, holding him closer. "Everything you've done so far has been amazing."

"Likewise," he murmured and found my lips with his.

As we kissed, the heat of his naked body pressed against mine was unbelievable. I still couldn't keep my hands off him—following the gentle curve of his spine, tracing his narrow waist, kneading the powerful muscles of his thighs.

He lifted up a little, and when his fingers closed around my cock, all my breath was gone. I'd jerked off a million times—how the fuck was it so much more intense when it was his hand? I couldn't figure out what made it so different, but I didn't care because it felt great.

But then he stopped.

"What're you doing?" I asked. "I liked what—"

He kissed me. "I want to try something," he said, panting against my lips. "Stay still."

"Okay." I was nervous as fuck, but more excited than anything else.

He kissed the center of my chest, and then started working his way down, and…

Oh God.

Oh fucking God.

He wasn't…

Yeah.

He was.

His lips were inches from my cock when he looked up at me. "Just tell me if you're gonna come, okay?"

I nodded. "Sure. Yeah." Because I definitely wanted the same courtesy if I ever worked up the nerve to go down on him.

Michael ran the tip of his tongue down the shaft of my cock, and I almost had to give him that warning right then and there.

"Holy shit!" My hips thrust up off the bed as if they had a mind of their own.

He did it again, and this time fluttered the tip of his tongue around the head, and before I could make sense of that, his lips were around my cock. Hot, wet, with his tongue teasing sensitive skin that had never been touched like that—so much for that stamina I'd built up from all that making out. As Michael added his hand to the mix, stroking the shaft while his mouth explored the crown, my orgasm was closing in fast. I held my breath and gritted my teeth—this couldn't be over yet. I wanted him to do this forever. I wasn't sure I could handle something this intense for more than a few seconds, but

damn, I wanted to try, because it felt so, so good, especially when he moaned and his voice vibrated against my skin

Somehow, I managed, “I’m gonna…I’m gonna come.”

I thought he’d stop, but he didn’t. He kept going. Maybe he didn’t hear me.

“Michael…fuck…” I wasn’t even in control of my body anymore. My hips lifted up, pushing my cock deeper into his mouth, and he groaned and stroked me even faster.

And I was *there*.

“Fuck!” I clapped my hand over my mouth, barely stifling a helpless moan, and holy shit, Michael didn’t stop. He didn’t even miss a beat, and he kept stroking my cock and bobbing his head until I shuddered hard and sank back to the bed.

Michael sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and flashed me the most delicious grin. “I’ve been wanting to do that forever.”

I’d forgotten how to speak, so I just gestured for him to come back up to me. He did, and he leaned in to kiss me but hesitated. “I, um, don’t know if you want to…after, uh…”

I grabbed him, pulled him in and kissed him. Before that day, the thought of kissing another guy after a blowjob was a little weird, but right then, it was hot, so I went for it. And holy fuck, it *was* hot. Like a vaguely salty reminder of what he’d just done to me, as if I stood a chance of forgetting any time soon.

He lifted himself up, probably to catch his breath. “You okay?”

“Y-yeah. You?”

He grinned. “I’m great.”

“Yeah, you are.” I lifted my head and kissed him lightly. “Where the hell did you learn to do that?”

Michael laughed softly and shrugged. “I guessed.”

“Lucky guesses. It’s really good.”

“Yeah? What’s it like?”

“It’s awesome. In fact…” I nudged him onto his back. “You should try it.”

His eyes widened, and he squirmed a bit as I leaned down to kiss his neck. “D-don’t mind if I do,” he said. “Oh my God.”

“Same deal.” I kissed beneath his collarbone. “Tell me if you’re gonna come.”

Michael nodded vigorously, and he squirmed as I worked my way down his torso. I’d thought he’d done the same thing to me as a way to tease me, and maybe he had, but it was a damned good way to work up the courage to suck his dick. Inching closer to him, I told myself with every soft kiss that there was nothing to be nervous about.

When my lips reached his hipbone, there was no turning back,

and looking up at him, I couldn't imagine turning back. Yeah, I was nervous as hell and had no idea what the fuck I was doing, but that look on his face—eyes round and gleaming, breath coming in short, sharp gasps—killed any hesitation I had left. I'd damn well figure out what I was doing if it meant driving him as crazy as he'd driven me.

I stroked his cock, tentatively at first, and then with more confidence. I wasn't so sure I could take him in my mouth—he hadn't had much trouble with me, but his cock was a little thicker than mine. But I'd also seen pornos with guys who were hung like tree trunks, and they'd managed to fit into all kinds of places where they probably shouldn't have, and Michael was much more…well-proportioned.

There was only one way to find out if I could take him.

Steadying him with one hand, I let the head of his cock slip between my lips. Instantly, I felt like an idiot for ever being afraid to do this. His skin was hot and salty, and I loved the way his hard dick slid between my lips, especially as I took him a little deeper. So that was why he was so into going down on me—this was almost as good as being on the receiving end.

"Oh…*fuck*." Michael's fingers curled around the sheets at his sides.

I glanced up at him, and my God, his face. His lips were parted, his cheeks and neck flushed, and his forehead was creased as he stared right back down at me with wide, gleaming eyes.

"D-don't stop," he slurred. "That's so…oh fuck…"

I broke eye contact and kept doing what I was doing, not giving a damn that my jaw and my hand were starting to ache a little. As long as I was turning Michael on like this, I didn't care.

A salty-sweet taste met my tongue. He must've been getting close. Was I ready for that? To have him come in my mouth? He'd let me come in his, but could I—

"Oh yeah," he moaned, barely enunciating at all. "God, yeah. I'm…I'm gonna…"

I kept going. I kept stroking him as he got even harder in my hand, and the head of his cock seemed to swell between my lips. He moaned again, and then he whimpered, and his whole body tensed and arched. His breath caught. He ground out a curse, and suddenly, all the tension in his body released, and all the air rushed out of his lungs, and semen rushed across my tongue. There was more than I expected, and before I could even think twice, I swallowed it, and he kept coming, and the way he shuddered and groaned was too hot to be real.

I stopped, and Michael collapsed back onto the bed as if he'd actually levitated off it.

"Holy shit," he breathed.

I joined him up by the pillows, and like I had earlier, he grabbed

me and pulled me into a kiss. Fuck. The taste of his orgasm, the tingling in my lips from going down on him, and now his always spectacular kiss? I never wanted to leave this bed. *Ever*.

When we finally separated, I touched my forehead to his. “So that’s why people like sex so much.”

He laughed breathlessly. “Yeah. That’s why. Jesus.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I have no idea if we’re doing any of this right, but everything we’ve done has been amazing.”

“I agree.” I brushed a kiss across his lips. “Imagine how much better we’ll be when we’ve had some practice.”

That grin damn near got me hard all over again. Wrapping his arms around me, Michael pulled me down to him. “You can practice on me all you want as long as you let me suck your dick again.”

I shivered. “Deal.”

~*~

In my car on the side of the road all these years later, I sniff sharply and wipe my eyes. I’ve thought about that night many times over the years, but it’s never made me cry before. Though my dick is hard and my body is trembling, the sting in my eyes is too intense to ignore.

They say losing your virginity means losing your innocence, but everything about that afternoon in Michael’s bed was innocent. It was sweet, and gentle, and one of those memories that I hope never, ever fades. It was a night when neither of us knew Steve existed or that he’d eventually find a way to leave his mark on every facet of Michael’s being. Before the panic attacks, the ER visits, the restraining orders that weren’t worth the paper they were printed on, not to mention all the fighting it took just to *get* one of those worthless pieces of paper. Before Michael watched his lifelong dream of becoming a veterinarian go up in smoke after he flunked out of school. He never has told me what happened, why he went from a straight-A student to failing his finals, but the way he averts his eyes whenever the subject comes up, and just knowing who he was going home to every night at the time, well, I can put two and two together.

But that afternoon we went to bed together for the first time, none of that had happened yet. Neither of us had any reason to be scared or cynical about the future, and it remains to this day one of the most beautiful sexual encounters I’ve ever had.

There was light in Michael’s eyes that day.

And so help me God, I will do whatever it takes to bring that light back to life.

Chapter Five

I finally get my shit together and finish the drive home. The whole way, I can't stop asking myself—and the universe, and God and whoever happens to be listening—if I'm in over my head. I'm even more determined to help Michael, and even less certain of my ability to do it. I'm already emotionally exhausted, and we didn't even get past a kiss.

Fuck. It's not a question of whether I'm in over my head—it's a question of how far.

I pull into the garage and park beside Ian's car. As the garage door closes behind me, I shuffle to the door and into the foyer.

Ariel thunders in and bounces, running in circles at my feet.

"Hey, baby," I say with a halfhearted smile and scratch behind her huge floppy ears. "Did you miss me?"

"She always misses you."

Ian's voice makes my heart clench. I look across the foyer into the living room. He's on the couch, grading papers as always, with Rosie on his lap. She glances up at me, and she's about as indifferent to my presence as she is to the papers Ian's using her to prop up.

Ian isn't quite so indifferent, though. His eyebrows arch enough that I know he sees right through me. He clicks off the TV, which he must've been using for background noise. "How did it go?"

"It…" I look down at the dog again because she's easier to face at the moment than he is. And even she seems to be looking at me like "Well? How *did* it go?"

I clear my throat. "I think I need a drink."

"I think I'll join you." He picks Rosie up and plants her on the other cushion. She hisses, and he grumbles "Bitch" as he gets up.

Usually, her attitude makes me chuckle—she really is kind of a bitch—but tonight, I just don't have it in me. I reserve what energy I have left to get me from the foyer to the kitchen.

A glass of wine isn't going to cut it tonight, so it's straight to the freezer for the bottle of vodka that's been in there for the past three years.

"That bad, huh?" Ian asks as I set the bottle on the counter.

Was it that bad? I don't even know if it went badly, per se. Michael's on board with the solution Ian suggested. He feels safe enough with me to do this. I can help. I can do something to *fix* this.

Ian wraps his arms around me, and I exhale.

"You okay?" he asks against my neck.

"I don't know." I rest my hands on his.

He holds me tighter. “You talked to Michael about it?”

“Yeah. He needs a little time to think, but it sounds like he wants to try it.”

“Oh. That’s good, right?”

“Yeah. I guess we’ll see what happens.”

“I guess we will.” He kisses my neck again but doesn’t say anything. Knowing him, he’s waiting for me to elaborate.

Finally, I lean against him. “It’s just so hard to see him like that, you know? Since I know what he was like when he was younger and hadn’t been put through the wringer, yet. It’s just—” My voice cracks. “It’s really hard to see.”

Ian holds me tighter and kisses just above my collar. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I kissed him. Didn’t go any further than that, though.”

Ian tenses a little, lips touching my skin but not moving. After a moment, he quietly says, “Oh.”

I turn my head slightly. “That’s okay, right? I mean, you’re—”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” Ian turns me around and puts his hands on my hips. “I, uh… It might take some adjustment. Knowing you’re with someone else. Physically.”

“But you said—”

“I know, I know.” He shakes his head. “I’ll be fine with it. It’s, you know, going from ‘in theory’ to ‘in practice’.” Before I can ask for the millionth time if he’s *sure* about this, he says, “How was he with that? With kissing you?”

I swallow, my spine prickling at the memory. “It was harder for him than I thought it would be. He’s definitely got some ghosts hanging around in that department.”

Ian flinches. “God, what a travesty.”

“It really is.” I shudder. “I think this process is going to be slower than I thought. I think…” My brain is threatening to send me back to that place it went while I was in the car. Back to the better times that only make the present more painful to accept. “I need…” My eyes dart toward the bottle of vodka, which is starting to sweat on the counter. Then I release my breath and gently free myself from my husband’s embrace. “I think I need a shower. I feel like I’ve got”—I shudder—“Steve all over me.”

Ian nods. “Go. We’ll sit down and have a drink afterward, and maybe talk about this some more.”

“Good idea.”

I kiss him gently and then make my way upstairs, Ariel hot on my heels. She follows me to the bathroom, as she always does. I stop there and pet her, giving her some attention, and then send her into the bedroom to wait until I’m done with my shower. Closing the door

is kind of a necessity with her in the house—otherwise it's a good bet she'll end up in the shower, as we've both found out the hard way a few times.

Alone in the bathroom, I turn on the water as hot as it'll go and scrub until my skin is raw. I hope to God this doesn't happen every time I'm with Michael. Hopefully it's just my body reacting to the undeniable reality of how traumatized my best friend is and how much damage that cretin left behind. I've known all along that he hurt Michael, but I never realized Steve's got a ghost like poison ivy.

The water is starting to get cool, and I'm as clean as I'm going to get, so I shut it off and get out.

After I've dried off, I wrap the towel around my waist. When I step out of the bathroom, Ariel isn't there. The bedroom door is closed, and Ian's lying in bed, in jeans and nothing else, but he's not waiting for me so we can go to sleep or go downstairs for a drink. Not with that gleam in his eyes, and definitely not with the bottle of lube conveniently placed on the nightstand.

My shoulders droop. "Ian…"

"I know you don't feel like it." He swings his long legs over the edge of the bed and rolls to his feet. He takes off his glasses, sets them beside the bottle of lube and then crosses the room to where I'm standing. As he slides his hands over my bare waist, he adds, "I think it might be good for you to remember why you're doing this."

"Oh, believe me. I haven't forgot—"

Ian's lips stop mine. Whatever resistance I have is slipping away fast, and in spite of myself, I wrap my arms around him. How he's in the mood is beyond me, but it's contagious. I wasn't thinking positively about sex when I came out of the shower, but even after all these years, Ian can still turn me on when he wants to, and he definitely wants to now. His mouth is taking over mine, and his palms are sliding all over my damp skin, and damn all these goose bumps for giving me away. And if they don't give me away, the hard-on that's swelling against his certainly does.

He guides me toward the bed, and with every step, his kiss gets more demanding. He wants me to remember why I'm doing this, what Michael's been missing all this time and I've vowed to get back for him, but sex with Ian is on a whole different plane. Michael is—was—playful and leisurely, never in any rush. Ian doesn't hurry either, but he's rough and aggressive, the kind of man who leaves marks. Whenever he's done with me, I'm satisfied beyond belief, and yet still begging for more.

Maybe he doesn't want to remind me what I'm doing for Michael as much as he wants me to remember that he's here too.

Oh, Ian. I hold him tighter, kiss him harder. *You don't ever have to*

worry that I'll forget you.

Ian nudges me back another step, and though my eyes are closed and I'm moving backward, I take the step without hesitation. His arm is around me, and he can see past me—he won't let me fall or hit something. My mind is reeling with anticipation but not fear. Because there's never been a trace of fear between us in the bedroom. Maybe some first-time clumsiness when we met, but actual fear? None. Never. I can't imagine ever being scared of Ian, or of him recoiling from my touch the way Michael did tonight. I can't imagine us ever touching each other any way besides…this. Like two people who are, for the time being, living and breathing for nothing beyond the other's pleasure.

My calves touch the bed. Ian cups my cock through the towel and squeezes just hard enough to make my breath catch. With a gasp, I break the kiss and tilt my head back, and he goes right for my neck.

"You've done enough thinking for tonight," he whispers, and his lips skate along my throat. "And you've got a lot of emotional shit ahead of you." He kisses beneath my jaw as he tugs the towel free. "So for tonight, I want you to lie back, close your eyes and just enjoy being fucked."

A shiver runs through me. My towel lands at my feet. "I think I like the sound of that."

His lips curve into a grin. He plants one more soft little kiss on my neck and then lifts his head. "Anything you want tonight, it's yours."

A million fantasies rush through my mind—all the things we've done or talked about doing in a decade—but I just whisper, "You."

Ian's grin gets bigger, more wicked, and he kisses me once more.

Then he drops to his knees in front of me.

And everything just…disappears. His lips and tongue, his hands, the way he moans with pleasure as he's sucking my cock—my brain can't even comprehend anything beyond all this. I watch him, barely breathing. This is one of my favorite views ever. His brow is furrowed as if everything he's doing requires intense concentration, and whenever his blue eyes flick up to meet mine, my heart nearly stops. Yeah, so much for not being in the mood.

"You're fucking amazing." I slide my hands into Ian's hair and rock my hips, fucking his mouth slowly, and he groans and bobs his head faster.

Then he stops. Disappointment has about two seconds to set in before he meets my gaze again, and…*Jesus*. As he stands, eyes gleaming like they were when I came out of the bathroom, my whole body is electrified. I know exactly what's next.

"Want me on my back?" I lick my lips. "Or—"

"I want you to stay right there. Don't move."

I don't move. Ian takes off his jeans and boxers, and then he puts his arms around me again. Holding me, kissing me, turning me inside out.

Now we're moving together. Going back. Going down. Even the instinctive fear of falling backward is barely there—Ian won't let me drop.

And he doesn't. He eases me down onto the bed, and sinks down on top of me, kissing me passionately and pressing his feverishly hot body against mine.

He doesn't stay like that for long, though.

"I want you just like that," he whispers, and kisses me once more. Then he sits up and reaches for the lube. As he strokes it onto his dick, I can barely lie still.

Yes. Yes. Fuck me. The sheets gather in my curling fingers. *Right now.*

He starts to guide himself in but hesitates. "On second thought…" He nudges my hip. "Turn around."

Those two words go straight to my balls, and I bite down on a moan. He doesn't just want to fuck me tonight—he wants to fuck me *hard*.

As I shift position, Ian hands me the damp towel I'd worn out of the bathroom.

"Put this down first." He gives me a moment to smooth the towel on the bed beneath me.

Then he's behind me. And he's pressing against me. And my head is already spinning and the anticipation is going to drive me insane.

And just like it always does, the first stroke takes my breath away.

My head falls forward. The towel and sheets are flimsy anchors, but they're something to hold on to, and I hold them tight as Ian's cock slides deeper inside me. As he always does, he takes his time, letting me get used to him before he starts going to town on me. It doesn't take long—we've fucked enough times, my body always yields easily to him—and he steadies my hips as he finds a perfect, smooth cadence.

For a few strokes, anyway. Just as my vision is starting to clear, and I can finally breathe, he speeds up. He has a death grip on me now and holds me perfectly still as he slams into me. Skin slaps against skin. Every thrust knocks breath from my lungs, and I'm pretty sure I'm moaning and cursing, but my brain can't zero in on anything except the way Ian's dick feels and his deliciously painful grip on my hips.

His weight shifts. Ian pushes me all the way down to the mattress, the cool and slightly damp towel beneath me emphasizing the warmth of his skin against mine, and he fucks me deep and hard, and between

his cock inside me and his hot breath on my neck, I'm losing my mind. Nothing else exists, nothing else matters—just my husband's amazing body against mine, his cock driving into me, my own cock rubbing against the coarse towel, and the orgasm that's building by the second.

I claw at the bed. Curl my toes. Try to complement his thrusts, but I can't move, so I just lie there. Lie there, close my eyes, enjoy the ride. Holy hell, I love the way this man fucks me. My orgasm is both irrelevant and inevitable—I don't care if I ever come, because I feel so, so good, but I will because it's impossible not to when Ian's body is against me and his cock is moving inside me.

He groans in my ear. "Goddamn, you get tight when you're close. You are…so…"

I bite my lip, squeezing my eyes shut and trying not to come quite yet. He's close too, and I love how he sounds—the way his breath catches, the way his voice is strained and shaky.

Somehow, he manages to thrust even harder, as if he thinks he can possibly get any deeper inside me. I press my forehead into the mattress, gripping the edges of the towel and holding my breath and—

And he sinks his teeth into my shoulder.

And I come.

One second, I'm on the verge, and the next, I'm gone, and Ian knows just how to keep me going, fucking me relentlessly as I gasp and cry out and fall to pieces beneath him.

Then I collapse. All I can do now is lie there and be fucked, taking him again and again while aftershocks ripple through me and my fingers knead the comforter.

"*Fuck*." Ian grunts. Forces himself into me. Trembles.

And exhales, his whole body relaxing on top of mine as cool breath rushes past my neck.

"Jesus," I breathe.

He drops a light kiss on my shoulder. "You're welcome."

I snort and roll my eyes. "Arrogant bastard."

Chuckling, he kisses the spot where he bit me. "Arrogant bastard who just made you come." He withdraws slowly. "So as I said, you're welcome."

I push myself up on shaky arms and glare playfully at him but can't help laughing. "Well, if anyone's earned the right to be so cocky in the bedroom…" I cup the back of his neck and kiss him.

"Damn right," he murmurs between kisses. Running his fingers through my sweaty hair, he says, "So much for your shower, though."

I shrug. "I'll cope somehow."

We clean ourselves up and collapse into bed together. As the dust settles and the rest of the world returns, that uncomfortable knot in

my stomach comes back with a vengeance. That's the downside of forgetting about things for a little while—they always come back, louder and more insistent than before.

I sigh and rest my head on Ian's shoulder. This road with Michael is going to be a long one, isn't it?

"Still worrying about Michael?" Ian's soft voice breaks the silence, startling me.

"Yeah. I don't think that's going to stop any time soon."

"He'll be okay." Ian kisses my temple. "It might not happen overnight, but he's in good hands."

On both counts, I wish I was as optimistic as he is. "I still can't believe you're on board with this."

Ian holds me closer. "If it were anyone else, I might not be okay with it. But if it weren't for Michael, I probably wouldn't have you." He nuzzles my neck. "I'd say we both kind of owe him one."

"Still."

"I promise, Josh, I'm on board with this. I want him to be okay, and there's no one else in a better position than you to get him there."

"So no pressure, right?"

"No, there's no pressure." He shifts around and props himself up on his elbow while I lie on my back. "A lot of this is on Michael, not you. You're not fixing him. You're giving him a safe place to work through the stuff that needs fixing." Ian touches my face. "Literally all you have to do is be the safe, kind, giving lover that you already are, and let him do the rest."

I swallow, watching my fingers run up and down his forearm. "Then why am I so scared to screw this up?"

"Because you care about him."

The lump is rising in my throat, but I push it back. "I do."

Silence falls, and I don't have the first clue how to fill it. Ian's confident I can help Michael, and I'm terrified I'll make it worse, and there's no point in beating that dead horse. The only thing that'll appease my worried mind is seeing the results, and that'll just take time. There's nothing we can do tonight.

Ian kisses my forehead. "Still need that drink?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know." I pull him closer. "I kind of want to stay like this for a while."

"Then we will. Come here."

I turn on my side again, facing him, and Ian wraps his arm around my shoulders and rests his other hand on my arm. His fingertips run back and forth along my skin, the touch both ticklish and reassuring.

Even in my most volatile relationships, and during the rough patches I've had with Ian, I've never been afraid of someone. In all the years we've been together, and the years I spent with other guys

before him, it has never once felt like a novelty to be safe in a man's arms.

Lying there with Ian, safe and comfortable, I let my mind wander back to earlier this evening. It feels like a lifetime ago, standing there in Michael's kitchen and fighting through all his demons for that first hard-won kiss before Michael finally had to back off. I almost feel guilty for making love so easily with Ian; we've been effortless lovers from the very beginning, and it's hard to stomach that we're still that way while Michael's been twisting in the wind all this time.

I take Ian's hand and kiss the backs of his fingers.

You deserve to feel this way with someone, Michael.

And I'll make damn sure you do.

Chapter Six

Parked beneath Michael's apartment building, I don't get out of the car quite yet.

So, this is it. Here we go. Time to get in way, way over my head and hope like hell Michael doesn't catch on that I don't have a clue what I'm doing, and pray to God I don't fuck up. How do we even get started with something like this, anyway? It's not like showing up at my old piano teacher's house.

Knock, knock—I'm here for the eight o'clock lesson.

I close my eyes and pull in a long breath through my nose. I've got this.

Right?

"*A lot of this is on Michael, not you,*" Ian's voice echoes in my brain. "*You're not fixing him. You're giving him a safe place to work through the stuff that needs fixing.*"

I gulp. That's all there is to it, isn't it? Michael needs a safe place. I am that safe place. So, with my heart in my throat and my knees a little shaky, I get out of the car and head up to his apartment.

Hand on the doorknob, though, I hesitate again.

"Literally all you have to do is be the safe, kind, giving lover that you already are, and let him do the rest."

What if it's not that simple?

I know people with PTSD. Even the most well-meaning friend can accidentally set off a flashback. One of my coworkers spent a year in Afghanistan, and he seemed okay with everything we would've expected to trigger him. Crowds and loud noises don't bother him. He took his kids to a fireworks show last year without any issues. Even the fire alarm going off barely made him jump. He told someone the only thing he struggles with is driving through mountains or open wilderness, particularly if it's a desert. His wife has to drive through places like that. Otherwise, he's completely back to normal.

And then someone decided to surprise him for his fortieth birthday last year. Apparently, walking into a conference room that he thought was empty and suddenly having the lights come on and two dozen people shout "Surprise!" was…not good for him.

I shudder, my fingers still resting on the doorknob. Michael's been on a relatively even keel, especially after all the therapy he's had. But is there some trigger I don't know about?

Only one way to find out, I suppose.

I whisper a prayer and then open the door.

Cody comes flying down the hall, barking and wagging his tail.

"Hey, you." I chuckle and crouch down to pet him. He immediately flips over on his back, tail still going ninety miles an hour as I scratch his belly.

"Cody!" Michael's voice sends a flutter through me. "Come eat!"

The dog is on his feet again and scrambling up the hall to the kitchen. I stand, push my shoulders back and follow him.

I've got this. It'll be fine.

I step into the kitchen.

Michael comes into view.

My stomach flips. This is it. Here we are.

I try and fail to will my heart to slow down. "Hey."

"Hey." His cheeks color, and he laughs softly. "So, um. I guess we're…"

"Yeah." I laugh too, which at least means I'm breathing.

"Do you…" He gestures over his shoulder at the kitchen. "Do you want something to drink? Coffee?"

"No. No, I'm good."

Our eyes meet.

"Listen, uh…" I clear my throat. "I'm following your lead on this. I don't really know what we're doing. I mean, where to start." I chew my lip. "Maybe we should talk limits. What's off limits at this point?"

Michael hugs himself and avoids my eyes for a moment. "Definitely not oral yet."

"Okay. No oral." Cocking my head, I ask, "Does that apply to both giving and receiving?"

He nods, but then his lips quirk. "Well, receiving might be okay. Maybe." He gulps. "Just *not* giving."

"Noted. What about anal?"

"We'll work up to that."

The fact that he's more optimistic about anal than oral makes my skin crawl—he used to love oral sex. Giving and receiving. I don't even want to know what Steve did to turn something Michael loved into something he's afraid of.

"So for tonight," he goes on, "maybe we could… Okay, this might be kind of weird."

I'm pretty sure we're long past weird and well into what the fuck, but I don't say anything.

He wrings his hands, watching them instead of me. "So I'm still not too sure about touching. Or being touched." He exhales sharply. "It's stupid, but there it is."

"It's not stupid." I manage to keep the venom out of my voice—that's all for Steve, not Michael. "After what you've been through…"

Michael shudders. "Anyway, if you're really okay with baby steps…" He raises his eyebrows.

“Absolutely. Your pace.”

“Okay. Good. Because I’m thinking a small step to start with would be a massage.”

“Oh. I hadn’t even thought of that. That’s a really good idea.”

Some of the apprehension vanishes from his expression. “Why don’t I start by giving you one, and we’ll see where it goes from there?”

I grin. “I’m not going to say no to a massage from you.”

Michael hesitates, but then he lets himself smile just enough to crinkle the corners of his eyes. “Bedroom?”

“Lead the way.”

Walking into Michael’s bedroom is weird as hell. I’ve been in here plenty of times—Ian and I helped him move in, and I’ve taken care of his dog while he was out of town—but never under this pretense. My nerve endings tingle. God knows how this is going to play out tonight, and how far this is going to go. Just being here stirs something in me—excitement about being with Michael, uncertainty about whether this will be a good step or an unmitigated disaster, guilt over going to bed with one man while I’m wearing a wedding ring for another.

Tonight, I’m almost hoping he doesn’t work up the courage to take this very far because I’m probably too nervous to get it up. Back when we had sex the first time, I was nervous as hell, but I had teenage hormones as an ace up my sleeve. Now? Not so much. And I’m sure that’s exactly what Michael’s psyche needs—trying to conquer his fear of sex with someone who can’t get or stay hard.

Oblivious to my worries, Michael picks up a bottle of oil off the dresser. “I’ve had this stuff for ages, but never used it.” He tears the plastic seal around the lid with his thumb and peels it off. “You’re not allergic to anything, are you?”

“Not that I’m aware of. What’s in it?”

He looks at the label. “Sunflower seed oil, some sort of flower extract, and—wait.” He looks closer. “Crap. I don’t know if this stuff is condom safe.” His eyes flick up and meet mine. “Is that okay?”

I study him for a moment. “Do you think we’ll get far enough tonight to need condoms?”

Michael tenses. “Um…”

“One step at a time.” I smile. “I just don’t want you to think we have to get that far tonight.” Especially since I don’t know if *I’m* going to make it that far tonight.

He swallows but then relaxes slightly. “Okay. Yeah, I don’t know. One thing at a time, right?”

“One thing at a time.” I gently take the bottle and set it on the dresser. Then I close my hands around his. He straightens, pulling in a sharp breath, but he doesn’t jerk away. Holding both his hand and his

gaze, I quietly say, “There’s no pressure tonight, Michael. We only have to go as far as you’re comfortable.”

He swallows. “I guess I…” His eyes lose focus, and then he shakes himself. “I don’t know.”

“Relax.” I smile. “It’s me.”

“I know it is.” His expression is deadly serious. “I don’t think I could handle being here with anyone else.”

Jesus. What did *that asshole do to you?*

His thumb rubs back and forth along mine. “For, uh, future reference, though, do you think we need to use condoms?”

I consider it for a moment. “Well, I haven’t been with anyone but Ian in years. It’s up to you.”

“I’ve been tested.” He shrugs. “I’m okay without them if you are. And if Ian won’t object.”

“Since we won’t have to worry about it tonight, why don’t I talk to him later?”

Michael nods. “Good idea.”

“For the moment, though…” I glance at the massage oil, and when I grin at Michael, he returns it.

With his free hand, Michael reaches up and touches my face. The contact makes my skin prickle all over and speeds up my heart rate.

Then, without a word, he draws me down, and when our lips meet, I release his hand and slowly, gently, put my arms around him. He cradles the back of my head as he deepens the kiss, sliding his tongue alongside mine. My head is spinning and my pulse is racing, both from the kiss itself and from Michael’s sudden surge of confidence.

And so much for whatever concerns I had about not being able to get hard.

I try to draw my hips back a little, but Michael presses his fingers into my lower back, keeping us close together. For a moment, I’m back in our early days, when a kiss like this was almost a guarantee that we’d be horizontal and sweating before long, and I hope like hell that this boldness holds out. That whatshisname doesn’t sink his claws in and remind Michael of his past and his fears.

Remember our *past, Michael. Not the one you had with him.*

He breaks the kiss and gazes up at me. “Wow,” he whispers breathlessly.

“Yeah. Wow is right.”

His eyes flick toward my lips, then meet mine again, and he grins. “I’m…I’m definitely in if you still are.”

I lick my lips. “Absolutely.”

“So, massage?”

“Yes, please.”

He kisses me once more, and then he lets me go. He turns down the bed and moves the pillows off to the side, and while he does that, I strip off my shirt and jeans. To my surprise, Michael starts getting undressed too, and I don't question him. This is all about his comfort zone, and if he's comfortable getting undressed, I'll call that a step in the right direction.

It's a struggle not to stop and stare at him, though I do steal a few glances. It's tough not to—he's always had a gorgeous body, and time has been nothing but kind to him. He's smooth in all the right places, sharp in all the others, with a few constellations of freckles here and there, placed as if to deliberately draw attention to his shoulders and pecs.

"Um." I gesture at the bed. "Facedown?"

"Yeah. Use whatever pillows you need. So you're comfortable."

I settle on the bed, which is a challenge now that my cock has definitely decided to join the party. Thank God for a pillow-top mattress. I take one of Michael's pillows, fold my arms under it, and rest my head on top of it. And then fidget a little more until I'm as comfortable as a man can get while lying on an erection.

Michael joins me. I can't tell if he's sitting or kneeling. Hell, he could be standing on his head for all I know—he's just beyond the edge of my peripheral vision, only his body heat and the slight dip in the mattress giving away his presence.

Now I'm starting to see why Michael wanted to go this route. Not only is a massage fairly benign, lying somewhere in the gray area between platonic and sexual, but it puts me in the most passive, nonthreatening position I can think of. I can't grab him or overpower him. I can't even look at him without twisting around.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Whenever you are."

I close my eyes. The bottle top clicks open, then shut. Skin hisses against skin—he's probably rubbing his hands together to warm up the oil.

Then the sound stops.

The whole room is still.

Every inch of my skin is suddenly hyperaware of everything, even the ambient air, as if my senses are searching for that first contact, wondering when he'll make the connection. When, and where.

And *if*.

What if he's having second thoughts? If he's—

There.

Between my shoulder blades.

Fingertips at first, and then more. His touch is tentative, almost ticklish, fingers and palm barely meeting my skin, and my whole

body's hyperawareness instantly concentrates itself in that warm outline of his hand.

Slowly, he traces the length of my spine, taking an absolute age to make the journey from the base of my neck to just above my boxers. The contact breaks, and then his hand materializes between my shoulder blades again, and he repeats the same stroke. Again. Then again.

The motion reminds me of someone petting a dog, and maybe that's what he's doing—taking something he does all the time without flinching, and transferring that to human contact. Allowing himself this type of touch so he can move on to massaging and…more.

Take all the time you want. I'm not going anywhere.

He adds his other hand. Starting at my shoulders, he traces the muscles and the outside of my rib cage. "This okay?"

You tell me.

"Feels great." I turn my head as much as I can without snapping my neck, and hope he can see my smile. "You've always been good at this."

He laughs softly, and the next stroke of his hand is more confident. More pressure, less hesitation, and it feels divine. His hands have always been a bit calloused, and the combination of softness and roughness sliding over my skin feels amazing. Little by little, the explorative touch becomes an actual massage. He presses in, kneads muscles that were tighter than I thought and damn near lulls me to sleep.

I'm not hard anymore, which makes it a hell of a lot more comfortable to lie like this, but it's not nerves or even lack of arousal. I'm just…that…relaxed.

I need to return the favor. Maybe not tonight—I'm following his lead, after all—but I want him to feel this way. Comfortable, relaxed, completely at ease.

I'm nearly drifting off when the bed dips beside me. Michael's knee materializes beside my thigh, and then his weight eases down over me.

Though he's barely leaning on me—touching, to be sure, but holding himself up on his knees—it's suddenly difficult to breathe. The heels of his hands glide up my back, but it's that thick hard-on against my ass that has my full attention. Two thin layers of shorts do nothing to temper that solid presence or the heat of his flesh, and lying on my stomach is starting to get *really* uncomfortable again.

Michael's hands stop. "Turn over."

Oh, thank God.

He lifts himself off me, and I roll onto my back. To my surprise, he gets back on top. His hands start just above my boxers, and slide

upward, applying almost no pressure at all, just skimming across my skin and forcing all the breath out of my lungs. If having his dick against my ass was maddening, this is unreal. He's rock hard, straining against the front of his boxers, and every time he so much as breathes, he rubs just right to make my breath catch.

The best part, though, is that I can see him now. So many memories flood my brain, and my mouth waters as I see him sitting like this in the past—on top of me, wearing next to nothing, gazing down with those heavy-lidded green eyes and that smile on his face.

I hear his voice from a lifetime ago: *"Stop me if it hurts."*

Years later, *"I'll make you forget that he hurt you."*

It hadn't hurt that first time—he'd been much too careful—and yes, he'd made me forget about the ex who'd stomped all over my heart. All before someone had come along and broken Michael.

Now it's my turn to protect you and help you heal.

Gazing up at him, I want to reach for him, but I don't. Not yet. He's still getting used to all of this. One thing at a time. No matter how much I want to touch all over his smooth skin and his gorgeous body.

Michael lets his hands slid from my chest to my shoulders, and then past them, onto the bed, and he sinks down on top of me. The temptation is almost irresistible now. My fingers curl at my sides, gathering handfuls of sheets and digging into the mattress.

"God, I want to touch you so bad, Michael."

He presses his hips against me, taking my breath away all over again, and murmurs, "Please do."

Our eyes meet.

"Stop me if it hurts."

"I'll make you forget that he hurt you."

Moving slowly, I reach for him, and we both gasp as my palms come to rest on his sides. As I wrap my arms around him, I hold my breath and Michael shivers. He squirms a little in my embrace, but he doesn't pull back.

"You okay?"

"Y-yeah." He swallows, then brushes his lips across mine. "Just nerves."

"We don't have to go any further than this."

"This is a lot further than you might think."

I run my hands up his back. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Michael licks his lips. "Give me your hand." He grabs the bottle and pours some oil onto my palm. Then he guides my hand down between us and under his waistband, and he wraps my fingers around his dick. Instinctively, I start stroking, my slippery hand sliding easily up and down the thick shaft and the head.

Michael groans softly.

I squeeze a little. Twist a little. Squeeze again. “Like that?”

“Mmhmm.” He closes his eyes and exhales. “Oh fuck.”

With every stroke, my thumb rubs along the underside of my cock through our clothes.

“Sit up a little,” I murmur. “Clothes are…in the way.”

Michael hesitates for a heartbeat, but then he lifts himself up. I push my boxers down just far enough to get them out of the way, and to my surprise, Michael does the same. When he comes down again, his cock rubs against mine, and we both groan as I close my hand around our cocks. I can’t get my hand all the way around, but it’s enough, and judging by the way Michael whimpers and starts rocking back and forth, he agrees. He fucks into my hand and against my cock, and I stroke us both, falling into perfect sync with the motion of his hips.

“Is this good?” I ask anyway.

“Oh yeah.” He sweeps his tongue across his lips. “D-don’t know if I can come, but—”

“You don’t have to come,” I breathe. “Nobody does. Does it feel good?”

“Very.”

“That’s all that matters.” I kiss him softly and add, “I just want you to feel good.”

“I do feel good.” His lips graze mine. “This is… Holy fuck…”

“Perfect. Then don’t…stop.”

Michael kisses me hard, and he doesn’t stop. There isn’t as much oil now, and the friction is getting more intense. I’m about to ask if he’s okay or if he wants to add more, but then he moans and thrusts even harder.

With a shudder, he breaks the kiss and lets his head fall beside mine. I swear to God, his shudder echoes right through my body, curling my toes and lifting my spine off the bed. My eyes won’t focus. My mind is a mess. All I can think of is *please, please, don’t stop,* and Michael isn’t stopping. We’ve fallen into a perfect rhythm, his hips and my hand moving together like they were made for this, and *holy shit.*

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Keep doing that and *I’m* gonna come.”

“Good.” He keeps doing that, and my orgasm’s not stopping for anything, and when my breath catches, Michael thrusts even harder, and just like that, I’m coming. And coming. And coming.

“OhmyGod,” I murmur. “Jesus, Michael.”

And suddenly he throws his head back and groans. His rhythm falls to pieces, and God only knows whose semen is whose anymore, and who the fuck cares. He trembles and jerks, and then he releases a

long, ragged breath and sinks down on top of me.

For a moment, we're just still, holding each other and catching our breath. Michael's arms shake as he pushes himself up, but when our eyes meet, we both smile.

"That was a hell of a massage," I whisper.

He laughs, and I love that sound even more than his moans and gasps. He leans down to kiss me. "Guess we got a happy ending, didn't we?"

Chuckling, I nod. "Yeah. Guess we did."

One more kiss, and then he rolls off me and grabs some tissues from the nightstand. After we've kicked off our boxers and cleaned ourselves up, we pull the covers over us.

Michael turns on his side, facing me, and I mirror him. He cups my cheek. "That really was amazing."

I kiss his palm and smile. "Glad you enjoyed it."

He smiles but then turns serious. As his thumb traces my cheekbone, he says, "I can't thank you enough. I know we didn't go very far tonight, but"—the smile slowly returns—"I'm suddenly a lot more optimistic that we'll get there."

Me too. I haven't breathed this easily since we had lunch the other day.

I smooth his hair. "Same here. And I don't have any complaints about how far we made it tonight. Do you?"

"Not at all."

"Good."

He rests his head on my shoulder, and I kiss his forehead.

Tonight went better than I'd expected. On the other hand, we kept it pretty safe and benign. Sex is a minefield for him, and though I don't know where all the mines are, I'm fairly certain this will get more challenging as we go. Something is making him shy away from oral sex. I'd bet good money that anal isn't going to be easy either. Somewhere between here and being fully confident, there's a conference room full of well-meaning coworkers ready to send him into a tailspin.

But this is a step, and it's a promising one.

I'll take it.

Chapter Seven

Ever since Ian and I bought this house four years ago, we've had a weekly tradition of hanging out in the hot tub with Michael on Sunday nights. We started out getting together to watch movies, but after giving in to the siren's call of the tub several times in a row, we decided to skip the movies altogether.

Sometimes during the summer, we'll pass around a joint, but only when Ian's off school for a few months. Michael's boss doesn't care—she smokes too—and mine hasn't given a drug test to anyone but a new hire in years. The school district isn't so tolerant, though, so between September and June, we just crack open a bottle of wine and relax before the work week starts.

Tonight, however, is the first Sunday since this whole thing started with Michael, and it's the first time I've been nervous about getting into the hot tub with the two of them. Sitting between them as Ian fills all our glasses, I follow their lead. As long as they're comfortable and acting like everything's normal—as normal as they can be, I guess—then I'll assume everything *is* normal and act accordingly too.

While Ian's turned away to put the wine bottle on the little table beyond the tub's edge, Michael glances at me, eyebrows up.

Is this weird? his eyes seem to ask.

Maybe. But—I raise my glass—*we have wine.*

His brow pinches for a second, but then he chuckles and raises his glass too, so hopefully the message made it across.

Oblivious to our silent exchange, Ian turns around again. "To the start of another week of being gainfully employed."

"Cheers," Michael says, chuckling.

We carefully clink our glasses together—the last thing we need is for a sliver to break off and fall in the water—and settle back against the sides.

Next to me, Ian sinks down into the water until his chin is touching the surface, and closes his eyes. "Ugh. Is the school year over yet?"

"That bad?" Michael asks.

"Worse." Ian stares up at the top of the gazebo. "I swear to God, if I get one more parent asking why their kid is failing, as if *I'm* the problem…"

"Jesus," Michael mutters into his glass.

Ian lifts himself up and takes a sip, then sinks down again. "And they wonder why half the faculty smokes."

“Wait, they know about that?”

Ian swirls his wine slowly. “Of course they do. It’s the parents we’re hiding it from.”

Michael laughs. “Okay, that makes sense.”

“Yeah, most of the powers that be just ignore it as long as we don’t show up at school smelling like it. Or obviously stoned.”

“Or share it with the kids,” I add.

Ian snorts. “Or buy it from them.”

Michael nearly spits out his wine. “Please tell me no one’s done that.”

“Which part?” Ian asks. “Coming to school stoned, sharing it with the kids or buying it from them?”

Michael raises his eyebrows. “Uh, any of the above?”

Ian purses his lips. “Well, rumor has it some kids stole the gym teacher’s stash, and when they got caught, they ratted him out.”

“Did he get canned?”

“Not after he threatened to pay his dealer to produce a list of everyone who bought from her.” Ian laughs into his glass. “The whole thing disappeared pretty quickly after that.”

Michael whistles. “Wow, I didn’t realize pot was such a hot commodity.”

“At a school where we’re trying to educate the children of entitled rich fucks who believe grades are given, not earned?” Ian raises his glass in a mock toast. “You’re damn right it’s a hot commodity.”

“Huh. Yeah. I guess I can see that.” Michael takes a sip. “I’m sure there are worse ways to cope.”

“There are. And believe me—people do those too.” Ian scowls. “Last year, two teachers at another school were busted buying Adderall off the kids. You know it’s getting bad when the kids and teachers need the same drugs to function.”

“Ugh,” Michael says. “That’s just sad.”

Ian and I both nod. We’ve had many, many conversations about the teachers and students alike being driven to desperate measures, or out of school entirely. If Ian didn’t enjoy working with the kids so much, he’d have walked out and gotten a job at Radio Shack or something just to keep his sanity. But he loves what he does, so he grinds his teeth through meetings with parents, indulges in some wine on the weekends and then loses himself in a little bit of weed over the summer.

The mood in the hot tub threatens to get depressing, but Rosie picks that exact moment to climb up the side of the gazebo. Though she does it every single time we’re out here, she still startles the hell out of all three of us.

Indifferently, Rosie wanders along the side, safely on the wood,

and stops beside Michael. She bumps her head against his, and he reaches up to scratch her chin. As he does, she puts her front paws on the slippery edge and leans toward him, balancing precariously.

Ian gives an exasperated sigh. “You know, cat, one of these days, your dumb ass is going to fall into this tub.”

Michael shoots him a good-natured glare. “And you’ll laugh your head off, won’t you?”

“Well, you have to admit,” Ian says, bringing his glass up to his lips, “it *would* be funny.”

“Aww, no it wouldn’t.” Michael strokes her back with a wet hand, leaving her coat soaked. “He’s so mean to you.”

“Uh-huh.” I laugh. “Says the man who thinks it’s hilarious to pet her like that so she’ll go dry off on *our* furniture.”

“I just can’t believe she puts up with it.” Ian pauses. “Wait, no, never mind. Michael can do no wrong in her eyes.”

“Eh, you don’t have any room to complain.” I playfully nudge his leg with my foot. “At least she actually likes you.”

“Most of the time.” He nods toward Michael. “I mean, okay, she hates you, but she likes him better than me.”

“There’s a hierarchy.” Michael shrugs. “Not my fault I came out on top.”

Ian opens his mouth to retort, but pauses.

And then Michael turns beet red.

And then I get it.

Michael clears his throat. “I, uh…I meant in the—”

“Cat hierarchy.” Ian reaches for the wine bottle. “Got it.” He tops us all off, but even the wine can’t fill this unusual—and totally predictable—awkward silence. So much for things being completely normal.

Michael stares into his glass. “I, uh, don’t want to make things weird, but I think we should, you know, talk. About what’s going on.” He gestures at me.

Ian takes a deep swallow of wine. As he sets his glass on the edge, he nods. “Okay. We can talk about it.” His eyes dart back and forth between us. “What exactly…” He glances at his glass again, as if he might drain what’s left in one go. But he doesn’t. He slides a hand over my knee as he often does. “What do we *need* to talk about?”

Good question. We should address the issue, and we should be open about it, but what needs to be said?

They don’t offer up anything. Michael doesn’t look up from his glass. Ian can’t seem to get comfortable beside me.

My stomach twists and my heart races. “Well, for starters, maybe now would be a good time to address the condom issue.”

They both tense a bit.

“Condom issue?” Ian asks.

“Yeah.” I glance at Michael, then turn to my husband, lacing our fingers together beneath the water. “Do you have any preference? As far as whether or not we use them?”

“Oh.” Ian absently rubs my thumb with his. “Um. Not really, no. I know Josh is clean.”

“And I haven’t touched anyone in years,” Michael says.

“Then if you guys don’t want to use them, I…” Ian pauses, reaching for his glass with his other hand. “I guess I don’t have any issue with that.”

“We don’t have to. It’s completely up to you.”

Ian’s eyes lose focus, and he slowly sips his wine. For a few seconds, he rolls it around in his mouth. Michael and I exchange uncertain glances.

But then Ian shrugs and puts the glass aside again. “I trust you both. If you’re comfortable going bareback, then I’m comfortable with it too.”

“If that changes,” I say quietly, “all you have to do is tell us.”

Ian nods, a faint smile forming on his lips, and he squeezes my knee beneath the water. “I will. But I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

Even still, silence falls again, and it stretches well into awkward. I’m not sure we have enough wine for this conversation. Maybe it should have waited until after the school year.

Except it can’t wait. We need to clear the air and make sure we’re all on the same page before this continues, because I refuse to let this damage my friendship *or* my marriage.

It’s Michael who finally breaks the silence. “I guess the biggest question I have is, condoms aside, are you sure you’re okay with this, Ian? I mean, let me just put it out there.” He gestures toward me. “I’m sleeping with your husband.”

“I know.” Ian swirls his wine again, watching that instead of looking at either of us. “Look, I’m not going to pretend I don’t have reservations about this. I do. I admit it.” He glances at me before he finally meets Michael’s eyes. “But if that son of a bitch did something to you that’s still hurting you after all this time, and there’s something Josh can do to alleviate that? Then hell yeah, I’m okay with it.”

Michael holds his gaze. “Even if it means…?”

Ian hesitates for a split second but nods. “Yeah. And I mean, I’ll get over my reservations. The bottom line is that Josh and I both care about you. If there’s anything I can do to make this whole thing easier, I’m happy to do it. Josh is just…more suited to this particular approach than I am.”

My heart flutters, and I’m not sure why. His blessing? The incredibly subtle—and quite possibly imaginary—implication that if I

weren't here, he'd be willing to do what I'm doing for Michael? Just the fact that he is so damned unselfish, even when it comes to me, our marriage and our sex life?

I squeeze his hand. He smiles at me and squeezes back, giving my heart another jolt.

Michael clears his throat. "You guys…" He releases a heavy breath. "You really have no idea how much this means to me."

"You're our friend," Ian says. "It was hard as hell watching you go through all that. If there's something we can do, or one of us can do, then…"

"I know." Michael swallows. "And you guys have both already done more for me than you can imagine. If it hadn't been for the two of you, I might still be with Steve now."

"We never would've let that happen," Ian growls. "Another few months with him, and no one would've ever found that fucker's body."

The fierce protectiveness in his voice makes me shiver. Michael too.

"I know," Michael says quietly. "That's why I'm grateful as hell to have you guys. And what we're doing now, it's—" His voice cracks, and he quickly swallows some wine. "It seriously means a lot." Smiling a bit, he raises his glass. "I can even drink again because of you two."

"You couldn't…" I pause. "Because of Steve?"

Michael shrugs. "Oh, what isn't because of Steve? Obviously I got over this one."

"Was it…" Ian hesitates. "When he hurt you, uh, sexually, was it when he drank?"

The wine on my tongue gets slightly sour. Steve and alcohol had a volatile relationship too—I was pretty sure that was the only kind of relationship he was capable of having.

Michael shakes his head. "When it came to that, the booze was a blessing in disguise, actually. Sometimes I'd encourage him to drink too much because then he couldn't perform." His cheeks color. "The alcohol could make him violent, but…" For a moment, his eyes are distant. Then he brings his glass up again and mutters into it, "That was better than the alternative."

Ian and I exchange wide-eyed glances. We'd seen Michael with concussions, cracked ribs, stitches, the occasional black eye, even a broken wrist. That was better than the alternative? How bad did it *get*?

He must see the question in my eyes, because he adds, "Trust me on this one."

"I do," I say. "It's just hard to imagine."

“Yeah, it is,” Ian breathes.

“Well, a lot of it’s behind me.” Michael pushes his shoulders back and rests his head against the edge of the tub. “Five years of therapy will do that to you.” He smiles, and it’s more genuine than I’d have expected during a conversation about his ex. “We’re still working some bugs out, but I’m a lot better now.”

“You definitely are.” Ian smiles too. “It shows.”

“Now if I can just forget him in the bedroom, I’ll be in good shape.”

“Well.” Ian turns to me. Then back to Michael. “I’d say you’re in good hands.”

Michael meets my gaze. “Yeah. I’d say so too.”

And I hope like hell that they’re right.

~*~

We all drink a bit more than usual tonight. Not enough to get sloppy drunk—none of us care for that—but we’re probably all pushing the legal limit to drive. There will be some mild hangovers all around tomorrow, but a few gallons of coffee and some more of water will get us through our respective workdays.

Ian’s got the highest tolerance out of the three of us, and he stops drinking first, so at the end of the evening, he drives Michael home. By the time they leave, he’s sobered up, so I’m not concerned.

While he’s gone, I cover up the tub, take care of the animals and try to ignore the creepy-crawly feeling that seems to follow every conversation involving Steve. It’s especially pronounced after tonight’s discussion. The more Michael tips his hand about what happened, the more I worry about what we’re doing. And having Ian admit to his reservations about all this isn’t helping. I’m glad he’s honest about it, of course. But going forward, knowing he’s not sure, is challenging.

Maybe I should’ve had more wine. Or less. One of the two. Fuck, I don’t know. I’m not even sure if a few puffs off a joint would be enough to unwind me tonight.

It’s nearly bedtime, so I start going through the motions. Ariel announces that Ian’s home, and I’m just finishing up brushing my teeth when he joins me in the bathroom. As soon as I see his face, my heart skips. His jaw is tight, his brow furrowed.

“You okay?” I ask as I slot my toothbrush beside the mirror.

“I’m fine.” Ian wraps his arms around my waist and kisses the side of my neck. “Listen, um, on the drive home, I did a lot of thinking. About Michael. And you.”

My stomach tightens. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I told you guys tonight I had some reservations.”

I turn around in his embrace and meet his gaze, but don't speak.

Ian swallows. "After everything Steve put him through…" He takes a deep breath, and the intensity in his eyes startles me as he whispers, "You have my unconditional blessing to give Michael *anything* he needs to put that son of a bitch behind him."

"Are—"

"I'm absolutely sure." He cups my cheek with an unsteady hand. "After tonight, whatever doubts I had, they're gone." He draws me in, and our lips brush as he murmurs, "And he's damn lucky to have someone like you."

"I think I'm the lucky one right now." I kiss him softly. "I can't imagine anyone else who'd let me do this."

"I trust you. I know both of you." He draws back a little, and that intensity is still there, but different now. Clearer. As if he's…*haunted*. "I just can't live with the idea of him struggling through this by himself."

Before I can respond, Ian kisses me, and he holds me so tight, it's almost painful.

He breaks the kiss just enough to murmur, "Anything he needs."

"Noted." I nudge him toward the doorway. "Tonight? Anything *you* need."

"Good. Because right now, I need the same thing he does."

His kiss ends the conversation but fills in what he left unspoken:

I need you.

Chapter Eight

On the way up to Michael's apartment, my pulse is already pounding and my palms have been damp since I left work.

Please, please, let this go well. Michael deserves it.

I reach for the knob, but the door opens.

And I meet Michael's gaze.

He grins. His eyes are gleaming and narrow, as if he's been plotting and scheming.

Oh fuck. It's going to be a good night, isn't it?

He closes the door behind us.

I shrug off my jacket. "You're in a good mood."

"Yep. I am." And just like that, he's against me, kissing me.

My jacket falls forgotten to the floor. We stumble back into the wall, and Michael's kissing me like he did way back when. Breathlessly, passionately, telegraphing loud and clear that he wants it and he wants it right now. But how much can he *handle*?

"Bedroom," he murmurs. "I can't wait."

He takes my hand, and we hurry down the hall to his bedroom. As soon as we cross that threshold, he's in my arms again. Fuck, this must be a good sign.

"T-tell me what you want to—"

"I want you to fuck me."

I freeze. "Michael, are you—"

"Please. I want… God, I want you so bad."

"But are—"

His kiss answers me. Still…

"Are you sure you don't want to top me first?" I moisten my lips. "Small steps?"

"I'm sure. I've been thinking about this all day." He rubs against my hand—fuck, he's already hard as a rock.

Goose bumps prickle beneath my shirt. "Have you?"

"All day."

"Well then." I pull him in and kiss the side of his neck. "Who am I to deny you something you've been fantasizing about?"

Michael shivers. "Please."

"Then why do you still have clothes on?"

Without missing a beat, he pulls back. His shirt is off before I can even start on mine. We strip down to nothing, and all the while, my heart's going crazy—I had expected this to be a long process, but after just one night together and a reassuring conversation with Ian, he's ready to move this far forward? God, yes.

We climb onto his bed, hands and mouths all over each other, and my head is spinning faster and faster. Now that I have his body against mine, I'm as impatient as he is. I could make out with him all night, stroke him and tease him and turn him inside out, but I want him *now*.

I kiss my way up his neck, and then sit up. "Get on your knees."

Michael starts to turn around but stops. He closes his eyes. Breathes slowly. Deeply.

I touch his shoulder, and he flinches. Subtly but unmistakably. "Michael? You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry." He shakes his head. "It happens sometimes. Just spaced out for a second. I'm good."

I raise my eyebrows. "We can slow down."

"No! I want to keep going. I'm good."

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I don't want to second guess him and undermine his confidence, but I also don't want to push him too far.

Michael faces me fully and curves a hand around the side of my neck. "I want this." He kisses me, and there's that boldness again—he pushes my lips apart, explores my mouth, teases my tongue. Then he touches his forehead to mine. "I'm okay. I promise."

I hesitate but finally nod. "Turn around."

Another shiver runs through him, and he grins. After one long, knee-shaking kiss, he turns around.

Heart thumping, I run my hand over his beautiful ass and up his narrow waist. The thought of being inside him is more than enough to send my body temperature soaring.

I put some lube on my fingers first. As I press my fingertip against him, he exhales slowly, and he curses under his breath.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just really, *really* want you to fuck me. Like, *now*."

I grin. "I will. After I tease you a little."

"Fucker," he mutters.

I laugh, and some of the tension in my neck and shoulders eases—his sense of humor is intact, so maybe he really is ready for this.

I tease his anus with a lubed fingertip. He groans and lets his head fall forward. Teasing him drives me as crazy as it does him, and this view is just…beautiful. His muscles, his freckles—I could stare at him all day. The only way this view could get any better is with my dick sliding in and out of him.

"Josh," he moans. "Fuck me."

With pleasure.

I gently press my finger into him, but it takes work. Even when we were both doing this for the first time, back when we were nervous

kids, he wasn't this tense. Or maybe I just don't remember. Either way, he hasn't been touched in years, so I take my time. He slowly yields to my finger, though it's still a tight fit.

"Can you handle more?"

He nods. Is he breathing?

"Michael? Are you—"

"More. Please." His voice is tense too, but he leans back against me as I'm withdrawing my finger, so I slide it back in. I crook it slightly, seeking that spot inside, and when I find it, he moans. He's still tight, still tense, but his voice is made of pure pleasure.

"M-more," he whispers again. "Please."

I add a second finger, and damn, the tension is even more obvious now. Though some additional lube helps, I can still barely move my hand. I keep finger-fucking him slowly, gently, letting him relax, but he stays tight as hell. Even as I stroke his prostate, driving soft little moans from him, he doesn't relax.

He shifts, and the sheen of sweat on his shoulders catches the light. The ends of his red hair are darker now too. What the hell?

He turns his head, revealing more perspiration on his forehead and temple. "I want you…" He pauses, as if he needs to catch his breath. "I want you to fuck me."

But are you ready *for me to fuck you?*

"A lot of this is on Michael, not you," Ian's voice echoes in my head. *"You're not fixing him. You're giving him a safe place to work through the stuff that needs fixing."*

I swallow. Michael knows what he's ready for. If he wants it, and he says he can handle it, then he does and he can. Right?

"Literally all you have to do is be the safe, kind, giving lover that you already are, and let him do the rest."

And maybe that's the key—letting him do the rest. Giving him control so he can call the shots.

I slowly withdraw my hand. "Why don't I get on my back so you can be on top?"

Michael considers it for a second and nods. We change positions—I lie back, and he straddles me. I steady my cock with one hand and cover it in lube with the other. Once I'm good and slick, Michael lowers himself until the head is pressing against his ass.

As he eases down slowly, I grit my teeth. He'll relax. Once he's taken a few strokes, he'll relax. Won't he?

"Breathe," I whisper. "Just breathe and take your time."

He nods. Exhales. Inhales. Lowers himself a little more. The head of my cock breaches him, and my breath hitches. *Fuck*, he's tight.

He doesn't move. Eyes shut tight, lips apart, he's still for several seconds before he lifts off and comes down again. This time, he takes

me deeper, but every inch is a challenge. Despite being in control, he's still painfully tight—I can't imagine it's comfortable for him. That taut grimace all but shouts that it's not.

"Michael, are—"

"I can't." The words are strangled, almost a sob. "Fuck, I—"

"It's okay. It's okay. We don't have to."

He lifts himself off me, and I exhale as my cock slides out. A shudder runs through him that sends a chill through me, and he releases a choked, panicked sound.

"Easy." I embrace him gently and guide him down to the bed. Holy fuck, he's shaking. "Michael?"

"I can't. I'm…" He shudders hard. "I'm sorry. I'm—"

"Shh." I press a soft kiss to his forehead. "Just breathe for a minute."

He's breathing, but way too fast, so I hold him close and remind him over and over to breathe, that I'm here, that he's safe and no one will hurt him. All the while, I silently curse Steve. Wherever he is now, I hope to God he's alone and miserable, that he hasn't gotten his hands on anyone else.

Eventually, Michael exhales, and the shaking slows. "Jesus. I'm sorry."

You're not the one who should be sorry.

"You all right?"

He nods, and as I carefully release him, he settles on his back. "I guess I wasn't ready for that after all." He stares up at the ceiling. "Weird. Everything's fine, and then suddenly it's not." He's breathing more steadily now, but his heart's still going a hundred miles an hour.

"We can go slower."

"Question is, how slow?" He turns to me and scowls. "I mean, the thought of you fucking me has had me so turned on all day, I couldn't concentrate at work. Didn't raise any red flags in my head. Didn't make me feel panicky or anything. I just…wanted it. But then when we tried…"

I grimace and kiss his cheek. This really is going to be a minefield, isn't it?

Michael sighs. "I don't know what will be a problem and what won't. For all I know, you could fuck me into oblivion, tie me up, slap my ass, and I'll be fine, but then one kiss in the wrong place, and I'll fall apart." He combs through his hair with shaky fingers. "What the fuck is the matter with me?"

"Nothing's the matter with you. You've been through hell. That's going to leave—"

"It's been *five years*." He rubs his eyes. "Damn it. After the other night, and talking to Dr. Hamilton on the phone today, I felt good

about everything, you know? Felt like I could handle anything. But I should've listened to you. When you hesitated."

"You didn't know what was going to happen. We'll get there, Michael."

"Do you know how frustrating that is?" He covers his face with his hands, then lets them drop onto the bed. "I wasn't this wound up when I was a virgin."

"Of course you weren't." I touch his arm, and when he doesn't recoil, I move my hand to the middle of his chest. "Nobody had hurt you then."

He closes his eyes and shudders.

"Nobody's going to hurt you now," I go on, "but it'll take time for your mind to catch up with that. I'll wait as long as it takes."

He sighs. Neither of us says anything for a while. Eventually, Michael breaks the silence. "Can I ask you something kind of weird?"

"Sure."

He opens his eyes and stares unfocused up at the ceiling. It takes him a good thirty seconds to finally ask, "When did you know Steve was…"

"An asshole?"

"Yeah. That."

"Why?"

Michael shrugs. "Just curious." He turns toward me. "I guess I'm trying to figure out how long I was the clueless idiot in the gilded cage."

"You weren't an idiot, Michael. He manipulated you in the beginning, and he scared you in the end. And he fooled us all. Early on, we all liked him."

His eyebrows jump. "You did?"

"Sure. He seemed like a nice guy. Charming as all hell."

"Yeah, he was." Michael sighs, sinking back against the pillow. "And he wasn't always a total asshole. We even had some good days right there toward the end."

"Really? Even after everything he'd done?"

"Stockholm Syndrome will do that to you," he mutters. Then he shakes his head. "Honestly, he was a terrible person, but he could be a good guy at times. You know how some people are perfectly nice most of the time, but sometimes they're just insufferable because they're in a bad mood, or they're drunk, or whatever?"

"I do, and most of those people don't do the things Steve did."

"No, but he was kind of like that. To an extreme. Both extremes, actually. He was really good at making up for it when he was an asshole, and I stupidly ate it up every time." He laughs humorlessly. "If I had a nickel for every time he convinced me he'd changed."

“Like I said, he had us all fooled.” I absently run my fingers up and down Michael’s arm. “The closer you are to a situation like that, the harder it is to see the truth. Especially when you’re being played by someone as manipulative as he was.”

“There is that.” He inches closer to me. “The fact that that he wasn’t all bad all the time makes it worse. I mean, sometimes…” Michael moistens his lips. “Even now, I have to admit there were times when he was genuinely a good guy. Like when my mom died. He was a fucking *saint*.”

“That doesn’t negate the other things he did.”

“Of course not, but those things don’t negate the fact that he got me through that period.” Michael turns to me. “I’m not making excuses for him or trying to paint him as a decent guy. To be honest, I *need* to remember those good times because if someone like him comes along again, I’m afraid of not seeing the red flags because, hey, he’s such a nice guy.”

I shudder at the thought, and take his hand. “Another guy like him comes along, he’ll have to get past me. Assuming there’s anything left after Ian gets his hands on him.”

Michael smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Well, you’ll see it before I did. You saw it with Steve.” He pauses. “When *did* you see it?”

Now it’s my turn to stare up at the ceiling. It’s hard to imagine there was ever a time when I didn’t wish a fiery death on that man, but as sickening as it is to look back on it now, there was. Finding the dividing line, that moment when I began to see him for what he was, isn’t so difficult now, because there are few things in my life I remember more clearly.

I clear my throat. “Your sister’s wedding.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’d started getting a weird vibe off him for a while. Ian and I both felt a little ‘off’ about him, but couldn’t put our finger on why. That night…” I shift my gaze toward him. “You’d been acting really strange the last few times I’d seen you.” I cringe at my own stupidity. “I thought you were just exhausted from school. It was getting close to finals, and it didn’t even occur to me that there was something else going on. And he was kind of short with you whenever I saw you guys together, but… I don’t know, I guess I didn’t see it, or I didn’t want to see it.” I lick my dry lips. “But that night…”

Michael fidgets beside me. “What was it that tipped you off?”

Nausea creeps up my throat at the memory. “When you spilled your wine on him at the reception.”

He shudders hard. I lace my fingers between his and squeeze gently.

That moment plays through my mind like it's being projected right onto the bedroom ceiling above us. We'd all been having a great time at the reception, even if Michael had been exhausted from—I thought—studying nonstop and his boyfriend had been a little irritable. Michael had just topped off his red wine, and he and Steve had exchanged a few terse words about it. What Steve's problem was, I'll never know. Unlike that jerk, Michael's never been a problem drinker, and if he gets drunk, he gets giggly. He isn't even loud. He just thinks everything is funny—Michael drunk is like me stoned, and I've always thought it was pretty cute.

He wasn't silly or giggly that night. I'm not even sure how much he'd had by that point, but he was still steady on his feet.

His aunt, however, couldn't hold her liquor or walk in high heels. While Michael and Steve stood with Ian and me, she went tottering past, stumbled and crashed into Ian. He and Michael instinctively tried to stop her from falling, and they succeeded, but Michael's wineglass went tumbling out of his hand, bounced off Steve's arm and splashed across his shirt.

And Michael went *white*.

Ian helped the drunk aunt to her feet, but Michael's gaze stayed fixed on Steve, and something in the pit of my stomach had turned to ice as Steve's narrow eyes slid toward Michael.

I'd seen Michael scared before. I'd seen him nervous before plays, terrified before he came out to his parents, shaking as he waited to find out if a knee injury had ended his baseball career. The way he was looking at Steve, shrinking back and pale—I'd never seen him like that before.

Oh God, I remember thinking. *What the hell is going on?*

For the rest of the night, I'd tried to get Michael alone for a minute or two, but Steve was on him like the wine on his shirt. Then I turned around and they were gone, and Michael's mother said they'd taken off because Steve wasn't feeling well. It was two days before I heard from Michael again, and he insisted everything was fine.

"You don't have to answer this," I say cautiously, "But what happened that night? After you guys left?"

Michael rubs his hand over his face, and I can't remember when he started trembling. "After we left, he managed to make me feel two inches tall because of a spilled glass of wine, and…" He squirms uncomfortably. "Remember when I said I encouraged him to drink because drunk and violent was better than the alternative?"

A sick feeling coils in my stomach, and I nod.

"He was designated driver that night. It was the first time he ever got violent with me without the booze." Michael closes his eyes and shudders. "And of course, after he'd calmed down, he was still sober

enough for makeup sex."

The sick feeling lurches upward, and I force it back down. "Was that make-up sex consensual?"

Michael swallows, and when he speaks, he's barely whispering: "Not with three cracked ribs, it wasn't."

My jaw falls open. "Holy shit."

He shakes himself and clears his throat. "I mean, technically I consented, but only because in that kind of pain, giving in hurt less—physically—than trying to fight him off."

"My God. No wonder this has all been such a battle for you."

He nods. Then he turns his head toward me. "To tell you the truth, all of this is why I got hooked on hanging out in the hot tub with you and Ian. It was just nice to relax and talk, and be as close as I could get to anyone since Steve."

I cringe inwardly. I can't imagine five years of never getting closer to a man than sharing the same hot tub. "We'll fix this," I whisper. "Even if it takes another five years."

"I know." He lifts his head and kisses me lightly. "And I know it's not like that with every guy. Or even most guys. I know it was a fluke. I won the horrible abusive boyfriend lottery, and that lightning probably won't strike twice." He gulps, meeting my eyes. "But no matter how much I tell myself that, when my brain inexplicably decides it's going to happen again…" He shakes his head.

"I understand." I stroke his cheek. "And I can definitely understand why it's taken you so long to even look this thing in the eye." I pause, then cautiously ask, "When did *you* know?"

"That's a complicated question." He blows out a breath. "Sometimes, looking back on what I thought about things back then, it's like I'm looking into someone else's thoughts. I would never have accepted the shit he did, and I never would have made excuses for his bullshit. It was like it was me, but someone else was steering."

"Someone else *was* steering, Michael." I kiss him softly.

"Yeah, he was." Michael holds me closer. "He's gone now, but he left a lot behind. It's going to take a while to work through it all."

"I know it will. But we'll take all the time you need. I promise."

"Thank you," he whispers, and finds my lips again. He makes no effort to break the kiss, so I don't either. I clasp his hand between our chests, and we just lie there for a while, kissing lazily and holding onto each other, and it reminds me so much of those afternoons when we were teenagers. When we had nowhere go and nothing to do, and we could tangle up together and kiss like we had all the time in the world. In high school, we were always at least partially dressed, but this time, even completely naked—even with my wedding band sitting on the nightstand behind me—it feels just as innocent as it did back

then. We're both in our thirties, and yet it feels like we're two cautious teenagers all over again—exploring, experimenting, gradually working up the courage to go further.

Maybe that's how it should be. Michael's confidence was high when we started tonight, but maybe we should've held back anyway. Crawl before we walk and all of that.

I will if you will.

Then the lightbulb comes on.

I draw back enough to meet his gaze. "Do you still have that massage oil?"

Michael nods.

I push myself up onto my elbow and trail my other hand over his chest. "Maybe I could give you one this time."

He smiles. "I'm not going to say no to that."

I smile back.

He gets up to retrieve the oil, and I sit up too.

My first thought is to have him on his stomach, the same way he massaged me the first time, but as tense as he's been this evening, I want to tread carefully here. The first night, I was pretty sure Michael wanted to give me a massage because the position I was in meant I was completely passive. That may not be such a good idea with him, so as he comes back to the bed, I get up on my knees.

"Instead of lying facedown," I say, "sit on the edge of the bed."

He shoots me a puzzled look but hands me the bottle of oil and does as I suggested.

I kneel behind him. "This way, you still have some control." I pour oil into my hands and start warming it up. "If want me to stop, you can just say so, but you can also get up quickly and easily."

He turns so his face is visible in profile. "I was going to say I can't imagine ever wanting to get away from you like that." He faces forward again, though not before some color rushes into his cheeks. "But I guess after earlier…"

"That's why we're doing this. And I know it's not me you're trying to get away from."

"It never is," he whispers.

I rest my hands on his shoulders. He inhales sharply, and I don't move. The muscles beneath my palms gradually relax. I still don't move. Not until his breathing slows down and evens out.

I only move my thumbs at first. Down slowly. Up just as slowly. Drawing long arcs on either side of his spine. He releases a breath, and more of that tension melts away. Not much, but enough that I can feel it. I'll take it.

He rolls his shoulders beneath my palms, and more tension disappears. I cautiously start moving, making small circles with my

hands, gradually making them bigger until I'm touching all over his back.

Little by little, Michael's spine liquefies. When I push against him, he nearly slumps forward, so I tug his shoulders back to steady him. When I do, Michael leans against me. Then a little harder, pressing my cock just right to make my breath catch.

"Fuck!"

"Someone's getting turned on."

"Of course I am." I kiss his feverish, stubbled cheek. "My hands are on you."

"Yeah. They are." He tilts his head back and turns toward me, and our lips meet. Instantly, whatever I'm doing with my fingers becomes priority nothing. He reaches back, sliding his hand around the back of my neck.

His kiss is gentle but not the least bit hesitant. I can't rub his back or shoulders in this position, so I wrap my arms around him, and he twists toward me. Parting his lips, he nudges mine apart, and when I slide the tip of my tongue under his, he shivers.

Michael gently grasps my wrist and guides my hand lower. He closes my hand around his cock, taking in a sharp breath as he does, and encourages me into a slow, steady stroking motion. As if I *need* any encouragement. His kiss, his body, his rejuvenated confidence—there's nothing I won't do for him right now.

His neck has got to be cramping, but he makes no move to change position. Sitting back like this, he can't rock his hips, can't thrust—all he can do is stay like that and let me do everything. Let me have absolute control. And still, he doesn't try to rearrange a thing.

Michael breaks the kiss, and his head falls back against me. "Oh God. Don't…" He whimpers and grabs onto my leg. "Don't stop."

I keep pumping his cock. He screws his eyes shut. His whole body tenses, and he holds his breath. His cock gets even thicker in my hand.

He's so still, so tense.

Please, please, don't panic. Let yourself go, Michael.

He holds his breath. Every muscle is like steel. He's braced against me, digging his fingers into my leg, not moving, not breathing, as if he's gone into suspended animation.

I've got you.

Slowly, he's drawing in a breath.

I promise.

Tense. So tense.

Let go.

So fucking tense.

Michael, I've got—

And then he lets go.

Of his breath. Of my shoulder. Of all that tension.

Hot semen coats my hand and my wrist, and I keep stroking him as he gasps for air and he tries to thrust into my fist. Relief surges through me as if I'm the one who's coming—*yes! Yes, you made it! We can fucking* do *this.*

Michael sighs and sags against me. "Holy shit."

I hold him, kissing his neck and letting him enjoy the aftershocks for a moment.

"You're awesome," he slurs. "That was…"

I kiss beneath his jaw. "If you think I'm going to get impatient doing things like this, touching you and feeling you come, please allow me to liberate you of that notion."

Michael laughs and turns to me. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, we just gaze at each other. Then he tilts his head back for a kiss.

Eventually, we separate. I grab some tissues off the nightstand, and once we've cleaned off the semen and some of the massage oil, we lie back on the pillows.

I prop myself up on my arm beside him. "How do you feel?"

"A lot better." He reaches up and brushes a few strand of hair off my forehead. "About everything, oddly enough." He pauses, then quickly adds, "But you're probably right about taking things slower. So I don't freak the fuck out."

"You still might." I stroke his cheek. "If you do, we'll just do like we did tonight—step back, catch our breath and start again."

He flinches. "I think…" He closes his eyes. "I *know* you'll never get impatient with me, but part of me is still afraid you will." Before I can get defensive, he meets my gaze. "It's like in high school, when people would lose their virginity too soon because they were afraid they'd get dumped if they didn't put out. We weren't like that. We never were. But some irrational thing in my brain thinks we are now. Even though…" He sighs, shaking his head. "It doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"Probably more than you think. I mean, when we slept together years ago, all we were up against was inexperience." I take his hand and kiss the backs of his fingers. "You've got a lot more to work through now. I'm sure there's plenty of irrational crap that he put into your head, and we'll just have to face it as we come to it."

Michael searches my eyes. "I have no idea how much there is or how long it'll take to work through."

"Neither do I. But I'm not going anywhere."

"But there's also…" He chews his lip. "Look, you're going out on a limb for me, Josh. Every night you're with me takes away from time you could be with your husband." His eyebrows pinch together. "I

guess, in a way, I want to get through this faster to minimize the impact on your marriage."

My lips part. "Michael, my God. I'm not in any—"

"I know. Up here"—he taps his temple—"I know. But it's not rational. So this will probably come up again."

"Then we'll deal with it when it does. As for everything else, you're calling the shots. Please, *please*, don't push yourself too hard for my benefit.

Avoiding my eyes, he nods. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I press my lips to his. "The only one who needs to apologize for anything is—"

He kisses me before I can utter his ex's name, and we both let it linger for a long, long moment. As he draws away, he says, "I hope Ian knows how lucky he is to have you."

I slide my hand into his hair and kiss him again but don't speak.

Because nights like this, as I learn how dangerous and devastating his relationship with Steve really was, I think Ian and I are the lucky ones.

Because as battered as he is, Michael is still with us.

Chapter Nine

After that, we take it a little slower. Massages, making out, hand jobs—it's slow enough to frustrate Michael, but it also seems to keep his demons at bay most of the time. I'm happy to stay in safer territory while he finds his equilibrium, even though part of me is itching to go farther. I'd never dream of pushing him, but I want him to be back to as close to normal as he can get.

And who am I kidding? I want him. This is about him, not me, but the desire definitely exists. I'm only human, and he's one of the most gorgeous human beings I've ever encountered. When he's ready to take things further, he'll hardly need to twist my arm.

Slow and steady, though.

A couple of weeks go by. Another hot tub Sunday rolls around, and I have a few errands to run before Michael comes over to hang out. Ian and I always take turns handling drudgery on the weekends—dry cleaning, grocery shopping and all that other shit that inevitably falls by the wayside during the work week. Especially since lately, my evenings have been a bit…full.

By the time I get home, Ian's car is already in the driveway. I park in the garage, pop the trunk and grab some grocery bags. When I let myself in, Ariel comes thundering and barking to the door as always.

"Careful, baby." I hold up the grocery bags so she doesn't knock them out of my hands. "Down."

She whines a little but stops jumping. As she calms down and follows me toward the kitchen, I can hear Michael and Ian talking.

"…might have a shot, but their bullpen is a fucking disaster."

"Ugh. It is. I've seen stronger Little League pitchers."

"*I* was a stronger pitcher." Michael clicks his tongue, and I can just imagine him rolling his eyes. "I probably still am, and my team was last in the division."

I chuckle as I step into the kitchen, where Michael's leaning against the counter and Ian's pulling some glasses down from the cabinet.

"Are you two still hung up on all this sportsball nonsense?" I ask with a grin and hoist the grocery bags onto the table.

Ian laughs. "It's only nonsense to heathens who don't pay attention."

"Uh-huh." I put my hand on his back and kiss him lightly. "At least it's not football season."

"Not yet," Michael says. "The preseason starts soon."

I groan, and it's my turn to roll my eyes. "Okay, fine. Baseball.

Carry on. At least that game makes sense."

"I don't see how football doesn't make sense to you." Michael shrugs. "I mean, even if you don't understand the rules and the plays, it's a bunch of guys in tight, shiny pants throwing each other around. What's not to love?"

"The fact that the refs keep interrupting right when the throwing-each-other-around part starts getting good?"

They both pause, glance at each other and shrug.

"He does have a point," Ian says.

Michael nods. "Can't argue."

I arch an eyebrow. "But this isn't going to put an end to all your conversations about scrimmage and passing games and—"

"Not a chance," they say in unison.

I sigh dramatically. "Damn it."

Ian nods past me. "Need a hand with groceries?"

"Yes, please."

Michael comes too, and between the three of us, the trunk is empty in one trip, even with the giant bag of dog food and two boxes of cat litter. Of course, the minute we start unpacking everything and putting it all away, Michael and Ian are back to analyzing the bullpen and the…the…whatever the hell baseball fanatics analyze. The minute they're on that topic, my eyes glaze over and I tune them out, because *oh my God yawn*.

As much as sports bore me to tears, though, it's good to see the two of them talking like nothing's changed. They're bantering and debating—holy shit, I will never understand how there is so much to discuss about sports—as if we're back to the days before Ian suggested I sleep with Michael.

Maybe nothing *has* changed.

Ian puts a few plates of munchies out on the table beside the tub, along with a couple of bottles of wine. Then he and I run up to the bedroom to put on our swim trunks while Michael changes clothes in the downstairs bathroom.

And finally, it's time to relax for the evening as our weekend winds to a close.

"You boys know the rules." I lower myself into the water. "Sports are banned from the tub."

"*Fine*." Michael slides in across from me. "No sports."

Ian settles beside me. "Eh, that's okay. It was getting depressing anyway."

Michael grunts in agreement. "Fucking team."

"Right?"

I clear my throat.

"Sorry," they both mutter.

I chuckle. “What can I say? There isn’t enough wine in the world to make that topic interesting.”

Michael grins. “Well, there’s always the new season of The Walk __”

“No.” Ian glares at him. “Absolutely not.”

Snickering, I pat his arm. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“Besides the fact that it’s a stupid show that needs to be erased from human history?”

I shrug. “Well, yeah.”

Ian rolls his eyes. “Wine?”

“Absolutely,” I say.

“Definitely,” Michael replies. “I need a drink after listening to such heresy.”

Ian mutters something and starts pouring the wine. After he’s distributed the glasses, he says, “To Friday getting here as soon as fucking possible.”

“Cheers.”

We clink glasses and then settle back against our respective sides of the tub.

Ian starts to take a drink but winces and lowers his glass. “Dammit,” he mutters, reaching under the water and grimacing.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Feet.”

“Still?”

“Yeah. It was a *long* week, and they will not let me forget it.”

“Huh?” Michael cocks his head. “What’s wrong with your feet?”

Ian scowls. “They’ve apparently decided that standing in front of my classes a few hours a day is bullshit.” He brings one foot up and rests it on his other knee so he can rub it gingerly. “The last few months, they’re sore as fuck by Friday, and lately, they’re still aching by Sunday.”

“Why don’t you sit while you lecture?” I ask. “I know it’s not your favorite way to do things, but it might be easier on your feet.”

“Yeah, maybe. I might have to for a little while, just until this stops.”

Michael clears his throat. “I could, um…” His eyes dart toward me. “If it’s not too weird, I give decent foot massages.”

Ian’s eyebrows shoot up. I damn near drop my glass in the water.

Michael recoils a little. “Or not. Like I said, if it’s too weird, I—”

“No, no. Not at all.” Ian sets his glass on the edge. “I was just surprised. You haven’t been big on touching people for a while.”

I hold my breath.

Michael chews his lip, and some color blooms in his cheeks. “Well, maybe this can help both of us, then.”

Ian glances at me. I shrug. To Michael, he says, “If you’re sure, yeah, that’d be great.”

They both put their glasses aside. Ian leans back, spreading his arms across the edge. Michael scoots to—I assume—the edge of the bench. With the jets running, it’s hard to see much below the surface.

He reaches down but hesitates. “Are you ticklish?”

“Not really.”

“Okay. Some people are, and I’d just as soon not get kicked by accident.”

“No kicking. Promise.”

Michael chuckles and then reaches down again.

Ian closes his eyes. He slowly releases his breath. “Wow.”

“This okay?”

“Yeah. That’s more than okay.”

I watch them over my wineglass. The tub’s bubbling surface obscures what’s going on below, but I can put the pieces together. I’ve had a foot massage from Michael before, and I’ve given them to Ian. I know what Michael’s hands feel like, sliding over skin and gently working tension out of muscles and tendons. I know how Ian’s toes curl, how his other foot won’t be able to hold still while the first is getting attention.

Eyes still closed, Ian brings his arm forward and wraps it around my shoulders instead of resting it across the tub’s edge. His skin is cool but warms up quickly, and his fingers absently knead my arm, as if mimicking what Michael is doing.

After a while, Michael says, “Other foot?”

They both shift, Michael sitting up for a sip of wine while Ian lowers one foot and brings up the other. When Michael starts again, Ian lets his head fall back.

“Why the hell are you not a massage therapist?” The words are barely more than a groan. But then Ian’s eyes snap open, and he tenses, as if he realizes what he’s said. “Um, I mean—”

Michael laughs. “You know I don’t work with people.”

Ian glances at me, and we both relax.

“Fine. Fine,” Ian says. “Get your license for animals.” He squirms, squeezing his eyes shut. “As long as you’ll work on us.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Michael glances at me and shrugs, smiling sheepishly. “Maybe I missed my calling.”

“You *so* did.”

I chuckle, but Michael’s words throw me for a loop. We all know he *did* miss his calling, thanks to he-who-doesn’t-need-to-be-named, but the fact that he can make an offhand comment about it is…good? And he didn’t bat an eye at Ian’s comment about being a massage therapist despite the fact that massaging means touching. Which he’s

doing right now. Without any issue that I can see.

Ian glances at me, and that look sends a jolt straight to my balls. It's just as well the jets are still going, because if I know that smoldering gaze, Ian is hard as a *rock* right now. We always keep the tub a few degrees cooler than normal for that very reason, so we can fool around if we want to, but I'm wondering now if that wasn't a good idea.

Except he'd never let on and make Michael uncomfortable. I know my husband, though—I know what we'll be doing when we're alone later tonight.

He grins and squeezes my shoulder, then closes his eyes and lets his head rest on the side again.

Michael laughs. "If I keep doing this, we can probably talk about The Walking Dead and he'll never notice."

"Talk about whatever you want," Ian says, almost groaning. "Long as you keep rubbing my feet."

"I'll have to remember that when the new season starts." Michael releases Ian's foot. "There. Better?"

"Holy shit, yes." Ian pulls his legs back and sits up. "I'm serious when I say you would be an amazing massage therapist."

"I think I prefer being an amateur." Michael rolls his shoulders, as if he's stiff from leaning forward, and reaches for his wine. "But any time either of you need it, just say the word."

"And it's okay for you?" Ian's brow furrows. "I mean, with touching?"

Michael swirls his wine. A smile slowly comes to life. He meets my eyes, then Ian's, and he nods. "Yeah. I think it is. So"—he raises his glass—"thank you both."

"You're welcome," Ian says.

I smile. "You're definitely welcome."

Michael meets my gaze as he sips his wine, and my heart flutters.

Maybe he's already come further than either of us thought.

Chapter Ten

When I walk into Michael's apartment a few nights later, the whole place is dark except for warm light coming from his bedroom's open doorway. The dog greets me as he always does, but then wanders into the living room.

I continue down the hall. "Michael? You here?"

"In the bedroom."

Of course. Heart thumping, I walk into the room. And halt. And stare.

Michael's lying back on the bed, grinning at me. He's completely naked and…

Oh God. Completely hard.

He's grinning at me and stroking himself. Air? Who needs air? Fuck.

"Right on time," he says. "As usual."

"Yeah. And it looks like…" Seriously, air? I clear my throat. "Guess it's a good thing I wasn't late."

He laughs softly, and I'm completely mesmerized as he slowly, *slowly* strokes himself. Why the hell am I still standing all the way over here, anyway? I snap out of it, take off my shoes and socks and join him on the bed.

Michael pulls me over the top of him and kisses me. *Jesus*. Somehow, my clothes haven't evaporated right off me, but I'm okay with that. There is something unspeakably hot about being on top of his naked body while I'm still dressed.

"I want to go further tonight," he says. "Not as far as we tried to that other time. When I…" He shudders.

"How far?"

Michael licks his lips. "Don't know yet. Just further."

This shaky confidence sends my pulse soaring. I can't think straight, and sure as fuck can't speak, so I kiss him again instead. He drags his nails up my back—holy shit, that burn gives me goose bumps. He's out of breath, he's kissing me like his life depends on it, and I'm doing the same to him, especially since every time I move, his erection presses against mine through my jeans and fucks my equilibrium right to hell. I've been here all of two minutes, and I'm already turned on to the point of madness.

I'll take you as far as you want to go, Michael.

As far as you can *go*.

My own thought jolts me—he's been ambitious like this before, and it's backfired. How do I make sure that doesn't happen this time?

I break the kiss and go for his neck. Michael arches, baring as much of his throat as possible, and I explore every inch of it, and even as I'm kissing and nipping his hot skin, my mind is reeling—*how far can he go? How far do I push this?*

It doesn't help that my jeans are unbearably tight. What I wouldn't give to be inside him right now, but he can't possibly be ready for that yet, and this needs to happen at his pace. Small steps. Small, frustrating steps that are driving him insane.

But he wants to go further tonight.

Maybe…

Forcing back my nerves, I lift my head. "Do you trust me?"

"Absolutely."

I sweep my tongue across my lips. "There's a boundary I want to push. If you'll let me."

His eyes widen a little, and he gulps. "Which one?"

I nod toward the door. "When I walked in here tonight, you looked just like you did that first time we were really in bed together. The first time—"

"The first time we went down on each other." His voice is taut and unsteady.

"Exactly. And my first thought was how much I wanted to make you feel like you made me feel that night."

He squirms a bit.

"I know it's a huge step for you," I whisper. "But you said you might be okay receiving, right?"

"I… Maybe?"

"Do you want to try?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation. "I so do."

"I promise, I won't hurt you." I drop a light kiss on his lips. "Say the word, and I'll stop. No questions asked."

"I know." He caresses my face. "I've never doubted that with you."

"So you want me to…?"

He studies me for a moment and then nods slowly. "I don't know if I can handle it." His features tighten for a second, but he starts to relax, and his eyes narrow as a grin comes to life. "I do want to try."

I grin back and lean down to let my lips graze his. Then I start downward, kissing underneath his jaw before continuing along his throat. His skin is deliciously hot to the touch, and when I reach his collarbone, I can't resist a gentle bite.

"Fuck." Michael arches beneath me. His fingers run through my hair, twitching each time my lips or teeth touch his flesh. "This definitely brings back memories."

I glance up at him. "Good ones?"

"V-very good ones."

I kiss below his collarbone and inch downward. I tease one nipple with my tongue. Then the other. He curses under his breath while I struggle to catch mine—I should be used to the mix of nerves and arousal by now, but tonight, they're both more intense. A lot more intense. This could turn out so incredibly hot, and it could so easily turn into a disaster.

No pressure, Josh.

One kiss at a time, I work my way back to the middle of his chest and start down again. This reminds me so much of that first time, when every light kiss down his beautiful torso gave me the courage to continue. Helped me work up the nerve to suck his cock for the very first time. Now, it's the same, and it couldn't be more different, and I pray with every touch of my lips to his skin that this ends the way it did that very first time. Orgasms. Kisses. Smiles. No ghosts, no demons—only pleasure and innocence.

Michael shifts a bit. I glance up, and he's lifted himself onto one elbow, probably to give himself a better view. He still has a hand in my hair, combing through it in gentle, uneven motions.

"You good?" I ask.

He runs the tip of his tongue across the inside of his lip, and nods.

I keep going. His abs tighten beneath my lips. A flick of my tongue above his navel makes him gasp. His fingers twitch in my hair. Not long ago, I'd have been convinced he was about to grab my hair, jerk my head back and call this whole thing off. This time, though, he's pushing a little, as if trying to encourage me to go farther, faster.

All in good time, Michael. I grin against the thin treasure trail. *All in good time.*

But I want to get there quickly too, so I continue downward. As I follow his hipbone, inching closer to his cock one featherlight kiss at a time, I look up at him again.

His eyes are a little wider now, and his forehead is creased. His chest rises and falls faster than before.

"Sure you're okay?"

He nods vigorously. "Yeah. It's just…intense."

"Good in—"

"Yes. D-definitely good." He bites his lip and lifts his hips, letting his cock brush the edge of my jaw. "Please, Josh…"

Goose bumps. So many goose bumps.

Cautiously, I tease the base of his cock with my lips. Michael moans and fidgets. His hand leaves my hair and drops to the sheets, and his fingers curl as I run the tip of my tongue from the base of his cock to the head. I do it again, even slower this time, to both tease him and give him a chance to get used to this.

The third time, Michael's whole body seizes. His knuckles turn white as he grips the sheets.

My hair stands on end. "Michael? You okay?"

He doesn't answer. And he's suddenly breathing *a lot* faster. "Fuck. Oh fuck." His whole body tenses. His grip on the sheets gets even tighter.

"Michael, are—"

He sucks in a breath that's made of pure panic. "No!"

I immediately stop and join him up by the pillows. His eyes are screwed shut, sweat on his brow catching the light as he hyperventilates and begs me—or maybe not me?—to stop.

"Please, no more. No—"

"Hey, hey." I hold him close—my God, every muscle in his body is completely tense. "Relax. It's me. It's just me." I cradle the back of his head. "Michael. Look at me."

He opens his eyes, but I swear he's looking through me.

"Michael." I run my thumb along his cheekbone. "It's me. It's Josh. You're safe."

He blinks a few times. One by one, his muscles soften. He wipes his eyes. Then his forehead. After a moment, he shifts his focus to me, and cool relief surges through my veins—wherever he went for those few seconds, he's back.

"You okay?"

Sighing, he closes his eyes again and rubs them. "Yeah. Flashbacks are not fun."

I shiver—I've never been through anything traumatic enough to cause my mind to suddenly quantum leap back to it, and I hope I never find out what that's like. Just seeing Michael slip away and snap back is terrifying enough.

He drops his hand beside him. "God, I'm so stupid."

"No, you're not." I stroke his hair. "Just talk to me. What happened?"

He's shaking like mad now, shivering as if all the heat in the room has suddenly vanished, so I pull the covers up over us and hold him close. It's uncomfortably hot while I'm still dressed, but I keep that to myself.

"What happened, Michael?"

"Goddammit." He exhales sharply and stares up—*glares* up—at the ceiling. "It wasn't anything you did. A memory came back to me, and it fucked me all up. It's like, as soon as something like that crosses my mind, there's no stopping it. Pandora's box, in a weird way."

"Maybe we shouldn't push it like this, then." Guilt twists beneath my ribs. I knew oral was a problem for him. Fuck. What did I do? "I am so sorry. I thought—"

"No, no." He turns toward me and cups my cheek. "I wanted to push it."

"But you said oral is specifically a problem."

Lips taut, he nods. "It is. And it's one I want to get past. I can't let this shit in my head own me anymore."

I swallow. "What do you want to do, then?"

"Get back on the horse that threw me." He lifts his eyebrows. "If you're willing to try again, I mean."

"Like *now?*"

He nods.

An uncomfortable prickly feeling starts at the base of my spine and crawls upward. No pressure, indeed.

"I really was enjoying it, by the way," he says. "Right up until I killed the mood."

"You didn't kill the mood. We can still start again." I lean down to kiss his neck, and against his skin, murmur, "If you're really sure you're ready, I'll gladly do it again."

He shivers. "W-will you promise me something?"

I meet his eyes. "Anything."

He touches my face, the apprehension in his quickly vanishing in favor of confidence. And lust. Definitely some burning lust. "This time," he whispers, "don't stop until I come."

My breath halts in my throat. "But if you want to stop, I—"

"I know. I have no doubt." He lifts his head and kisses me again. "But I don't want to stop this time. Just promise…"

I kiss him, letting it linger for a moment. Then, "Promise."

We lock eyes.

One more kiss, and then I start downward just like before. His neck. His collarbone. Down the center of his chest. Down his abs, taking my sweet time because I love the way it feels when a soft kiss makes his muscles tense like that.

"Damn it, Josh," he grinds out. "I want… *Fuck*."

"Getting there." I glance up, grinning at him. "Patience."

Whatever he says next, I don't understand it, but I'm pretty sure it's profane. Laughing softly, I keep going downward. It's not just to tease him, though. He's not the only one who has to work up the courage to see this through. There's more riding on this than a blowjob, and I've never had such intense performance anxiety before. I know how to suck cock. Do I know how to keep his mind here with me and make this fun and pleasurable when he's got so much trauma tied up with it?

God, I know this probably isn't something you approve of, but please don't let Steve in here tonight.

Then I take a deep breath, glance up at Michael one more time,

and go down on him.

The second my lips touch his cock, Michael gasps and tenses. I give him a little more—sliding my lips along the shaft, occasionally teasing him with the tip of my tongue—until he releases his breath. Once he's breathing again, I steady his cock with one hand and start on the head. I run my tongue around it, exploring every ridge and contour just like I did the very, very first time, and I'm rewarded with a whispered, "Holy shit."

His fingers rake through my hair again. I take him deeper into my mouth, just enough to nudge my gag reflex, and he swears again. The sounds he makes are driving me wild—the little hitches in his breath. The murmured curses. The low, strained groans. Everything he does drives me on, especially the way he keeps his hand in my hair, sometimes running his fingers through it, sometimes grasping it enough to hurt—whatever he does, I'm in heaven.

Michael thrusts up into my mouth. His cock is thicker and harder, his breathing faster, and I give him everything—stroking, twisting, licking, deep-throating now and again.

"Oh God." He sounds like he's on the verge of sobbing. "Oh God, Josh…" He fucks my mouth, gripping my hair tighter and gasping for breath, and then he groans, and semen floods my mouth. I swallow, and he keeps coming, and I swallow again, and he keeps coming until he collapses back onto the bed. "Holy fuck." He exhales, his entire body going limp.

I push myself up on a trembling arm, licking my lips as I move up to join him, and just like I did the first time we ever did this, Michael grabs me, drags me down to him and kisses me. He grips my hair so tight it stings, and he takes the breath right out of me. God, yes—*this* is the Michael I remember.

We finally come up for air. I touch my forehead to his. We both pant, and shake, and I almost cry because there's no demons here now. They'll be back, I'm sure, but for a moment, he's exactly the way I've missed him—trembling with the aftershocks of an orgasm, holding on to me, breathing against me, with no sign of everything that's haunted him all this time.

Welcome back, Michael. We'll make it the rest of the way. I promise.

My arms are about to shake out from under me, so I kiss him once more before I sink onto the bed beside him.

"I haven't told you this in a long time," he slurs, "but your mouth is un-fucking-real."

"Good. Always happy to please."

He laughs breathlessly. I do too, and I'm even more out of breath than he is. I'm still hard, still turned on, relieved beyond words that his fucking demons are MIA for the moment.

But I'm exhausted too. That was the hardest-won blowjob I've ever experienced. Jesus Christ.

Michael feels around, finds my hand between us and grasps it tight. "I honestly never thought I could enjoy a blowjob again."

"That would have been a fucking crime." I turn on my side, nuzzle his neck, kiss his collarbone. "All you have to do is ask, and I'll do it again. Any time you want."

He turns his head, finds my lips and kisses me softly. "You're the best."

Anything for you, Michael. Anything.

He draws back and meets my eyes. "There's still one problem, though."

My stomach lurches into my throat. "What? What's wrong?"

Michael grins, and he nudges me onto my back. As he starts unbuttoning my jeans, he murmurs, "You haven't come yet."

Chapter Eleven

I can barely focus at work, and it's not because of Michael this time.

All I can think about is the sex I had with Ian last night.

It was the first time we'd made love in over a week, which jarred me—I didn't realize until we were in bed just how long it had been. That can't continue. Even while I'm sleeping with Michael, I can't neglect my husband.

But that's not the worst part. It's chewing on my conscience and making me feel like a terrible spouse, but the sex itself was weird.

Ian has never shied away from my touch. He's never recoiled. A shudder from him has always been one of arousal, and a sharp inhalation is a sign he's about to come, not one of impending panic.

Then why…

I blow out a breath, staring at the computer monitor even though I've forgotten what the hell the spreadsheet I'm working on is for. All the words and numbers are gibberish.

I need coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.

I grab my empty cup and leave my desk for the break room down the hall. As I walk, my body reminds me that Ian *wasn't* shying away or freaking out last night—he was rough just like he always is, and he didn't let up until we'd both gotten off. All the panicking and recoiling was in my mind, not in my bed with my husband.

In the break room, I pour myself some coffee and take a careful sip. I've known from the beginning that things with Michael could potentially cause issues with Ian, and I've tried to be vigilant about that, but this wasn't what I expected.

It's not jealousy. It isn't Michael or Ian. It's…*me*. Specifically, my confidence.

The sexual minefield wasn't supposed to take this much out of me, but it has. As Michael gets bolder and we take things a little further each time, my nerves are fraying. I never know when a touch will ignite some memory in him, or when something we've done a dozen times will make him panic.

And now that's spilling over into my sex life with Ian. Just like Michael knows damn well I'd never do anything Steve did, I know Ian won't pull away like Michael sometimes does, but the kneejerk reaction is there. The irrational certainty is, in the heat of the moment, more convincing than it has any right to be.

Christ. No wonder I couldn't sleep last night.

What the hell am I supposed to do about this, though? I can't tell

Michael he's on his own. I can't let this affect Ian either.

Shit.

Well, there isn't much I can do about it here, and getting fired won't do me any good, so I top off my coffee again and head back to my desk.

There, I text Michael and bow out of getting together tonight. I'll see him tomorrow night, but I need tonight to gather my thoughts.

And do some damage control on my marriage.

~*~

Thanks to mainlining coffee all day, I make it to six o'clock, and I get the hell out of there. Tomorrow, I will be more productive. I'll even come in an hour early and get some shit done.

Tonight, though, I'm done.

Ian's already home, of course. As soon as I walk into the house, the dog greets me as she always does, and I find Ian in the living room. He's kicked back on the couch, glasses on the table and Rosie curled up on his chest. As I'm coming into the room with the bouncing, woofing dog, they're both waking up—he's blinking and rubbing his eyes, and she's stretching her paws and digging her claws into his chest.

"Hey." He gingerly unsticks her claws. "Guess I fell asleep."

I laugh. "She has that effect on you."

"Yeah, she does." He ruffles her fur and kisses the top of her head. "Up, sweetie. I want to say hi to Daddy."

She glares at him, so he picks her up and puts her on the back of the couch. All of that would've earned me a few bleeding scratches, but she just gives him the look of death, then jumps down and saunters out of the room.

Ian stretches. Then he slides his glasses back on. "How was your day?"

"Not as tiring as yours, apparently."

He laughs. "Yeah, because you didn't have to chaperone a field trip."

Grimacing, I shake my head. "You know, sometimes I wonder why I let myself be a corporate drone. And then you remind me."

"You're welcome," he mutters. He pushes himself to his feet, comes around the coffee table, and gives me a quick kiss. "You do look tired, though. You okay?"

"Yeah." I wave my hand. "Long day."

He eyes me skeptically but lets it go and gestures toward the kitchen. "Guess we should figure out something to eat. I totally forgot to start anything."

"We could always go out." As soon as I suggest it, I wish I hadn't. I'm too fucking exhausted to think about getting back in the car and going out to where people are. "Or maybe order delivery."

"Hmm. Let's see what's in the kitchen. It might be pizza night."

"I'm fine with that."

I follow him into the kitchen, and as he looks through the cabinets and the fridge, I pour myself a Coke. I sip it, but the taste barely registers. Big surprise, since not much has registered all day. Sleeping should be fun tonight. That's usually the first thing to go when my mind's trying to flail in too many different directions. Hooray. Especially since tomorrow is staff-meeting day, which means—

"Josh?"

I shake myself and turn to him. "Hmm?"

"I asked if you're sure about pizza."

"Yeah. Pizza." I shrug. "Sounds good."

He doesn't reach for his phone, though. "Is everything okay? You seem kind of distracted." His eyes narrow like he's reading me, which he undoubtedly is. "And you seemed kind of preoccupied last night too."

My stomach plummets.

Taking me gently by the hips, Ian looks me right in the eye. "What's going on?" When I don't answer, he asks, "It's this thing with Michael, isn't it?"

Bull's-eye.

I exhale hard. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be bringing that home."

"It's kind of inevitable." He tips my chin up. "Like it or not, there's no way something like that isn't going to affect you."

"But it shouldn't affect us. I shouldn't be neglecting you." I struggle to hold his gaze. "Do you realize we hadn't fucked in like a week before last night?"

Ian smiles, and then he kisses me softly. "If it's helping to un-fuck everything Steve did to Michael, then it's worth it. I'll be here when it's over. How is everything going with him, anyway?"

"It's…"

Distracting me from my husband.

Turning me into a goddamned basket case in the bedroom.

Making me second guess every time I want to touch you.

Ian touches my face. "Talk to me, Josh."

I meet his eyes.

And there's nothing to say. Nothing that can be conveyed in words.

So I kiss him.

Ian freezes. For a second, I'm scared to death he's going to push me away and be the adult and tell me we need to talk first, and he'd

be right, but…no. Not tonight. Talking can wait. I can't.

I shove him back against the counter, and he doesn't miss a beat—he's got handfuls of my shirt, and he's using them to hold me to him, grinding his hips against mine. His shirt falls away, and it probably hits the floor, but it could've ceased to exist for all I know or care because now my palms are against his hot flesh. I grab on to him, I dig my nails in, I hold him close so there's as much skin touching skin as possible. I can't even concentrate on kissing him, but I damn sure try. Ian's all over the place too, breathing hard and grabbing on wherever his hands happen to land.

"Jesus. Fuck foreplay," I murmur between kisses. "We need to fuck."

Without a word, he grabs my hips, roughly turns me around, and now I'm the one up against the counter. He fumbles with my belt for a second and then shoves my jeans and boxers over my hips. My heart's going crazy now. *Yes, yes. Fuck me*. The sound of his zipper makes me shiver. I grip the counter's edge, digging my teeth into my lip. *Fuck me now!*

Ian reaches past me. Something rattles. Something topples. Then he grabs a bottle and pulls it back to him, and I catch a fleeting glimpse of it.

Was that…olive oil?

Oh hell, I don't care what it is. I bite my lip, trying to stay standing, stay sane, stay breathing. I don't care what he's using as long as—

Ian presses his slick cock against my ass, and my mind goes blank. As soon as the head slides into me, Ian doesn't hold back. He forces himself in, and I'd moan if I could breathe at all. With no prep or stretching, the burn is intense. I shove myself back against him, searching for more, desperately trying to drive him all the way inside me. It burns, it makes my eyes water, and I need more. More. *More*.

Ian presses his lips to the side of my neck, and every hot breath he releases rushes past my skin. I brace a hand against the cabinet and try to push back against him, but he's got me pinned against the counter, and I can barely move.

"Just stay like that," he pants. "Let me…let me…"

Oh, I let him. I hold myself in place as much as I can, and he slams into me again and again, pounding me so hard, it's deliciously painful. I'm begging him not to stop. Or at least I think I am. I want to. Whether my mouth can form the words is another matter. Still, he must know what I want, or maybe he's just so far gone himself that all he wants to do is try to force himself deeper and deeper.

My knees are going to tremble right out from under me. My hand slips off the cabinet. I drop onto my elbows, letting my head fall

forward, and I distantly hear myself cry out, and without even touching myself, I come, driven on and on by Ian's powerful thrusts. He grunts, and he thrusts so hard, the edge of the counter bites into my hipbones, and he holds me there, pinning me in place as his cock pulses inside me. "Fuck," he breathes, and one last shudder goes through him.

Thank God for the counter. As we tremble and catch our breath, it's about the only thing keeping us both from melting to the floor.

He pulls out and then kisses the base of my neck. "Go get in the shower. I'll be there in a minute."

Speech isn't possible, so I just nod and make a half-assed attempt at fixing my clothes. My legs are shaky and my head's still spinning, but I manage to get upstairs to the master bedroom. I strip out of my clothes, clean some of the oil off my skin, and then do as I'm told—into the shower.

I don't know how long it's been since we've had spontaneous sex like that. A blowjob here and there, maybe, but full-on fucking that can't even wait until we find actual lube? Oh God. We need to do that more often.

A few minutes after I get in the shower, Ian joins me, and it's instantly clear that he's not at all interested in stopping. Though we're making a somewhat concerted effort to get clean, his lips are on me almost constantly—on my neck, my shoulders, my mouth. His hands are everywhere, sliding over wet skin and digging nails in now and then to make me gasp. I love it when he gets like this. When he's demanding and insatiable and utterly fucking relentless. After all the fraught, uneasy sex I've had with Michael lately, I need this. I need to remember what it's like to just let go with someone who *can* let go.

Ian turns off the shower. We dry off—sort of—and then tumble into bed. *God*, he feels good—hot skin against mine, his cock hardening again, his lips skating across my neck and collarbone. Yeah, he's definitely not done. And neither am I. I don't care if I can function tomorrow—I want everything he's willing to give me tonight. We're both hard, and panting, and grinding together, and clawing at each other.

Then Ian reaches for the nightstand. "Knees."

"'kay."

We're down to single syllables. I'm surprised either of us is that articulate.

I've barely gotten myself situated before Ian's against me, and then he's inside me, and he's fucking me again, slamming into me painfully deep and hard, and I can't get enough. My elbows falter, then collapse under me, and I drop onto my forearms as my husband fucks me exactly the way I love it. Exactly the way I've been needing

it and didn't even know it. It's just us tonight, no one from the past or the present in between us—it's him, and me, and the violent, bed-shaking sex we've had since day one.

"Harder," I whimper. "F-fuck me harder."

Ian groans, and he pounds me so hard, my vision blurs. My knees burn on the sheets, and every thrust reverberates up my spine, and I dig the heels of my hands into the mattress and push myself back against him, searching for more even though I can't take any more.

I lift myself up as much as I can and reach beneath us. As soon as I start jerking myself off, Ian's dick seems to get even thicker as I tighten around him. He curses under his breath and grips my hips tighter, but his rhythm falters like it sometimes does when he's getting tired.

I find enough breath to murmur, "Let me get on top."

Ian slows, then stops. "Good call."

He pulls out and rolls onto his back. I climb on top, and we both curse as I lower myself onto his cock. I ride him just the way *he* loves it—hard, rocking my hips, trying to force the breath out of him every time I come down. He meets me halfway too. He doesn't hold on to me, but every time I come down, he thrusts up, and even though I've come once tonight, and I'm already sensitive enough that this could get painful in a hurry, I love it.

"Touch yourself," he orders. "Lemme see you get yourself off."

I balance on one arm and, with the other hand, start jerking my cock.

"Oh yeah." He bites his lip, fucking me from below. "Oh God, yeah."

He doesn't stop. I don't stop. We fuck, we touch, and we curse, and I'm in so many levels of heaven, I can't even see straight, and my God, no one but Ian can get me this close this fast after I've already come once. My legs are burning from exertion, my wrist and elbow are starting to ache, but I'm not stopping for anything. Not until I come on him and he comes in me, and the way I feel right now, the way my vision keeps blurring and my body's shaking all over, I'm so damned—

"*Fuck!*"

I fall forward on my free hand, and somehow keep pumping my dick as semen spurts across his abs. Screwing his eyes shut, Ian thrusts up into me. I don't even know who's in control anymore. I don't care. I love the way he feels and looks and sounds, and I want him to feel as amazing as I do, so despite my aching hips and thighs and my spinning head, I give him everything I have—still riding him hard, still rolling my hips just the way he likes it. My rhythm is all over the place. My body's trembling. I'm so dizzy, I'm ready to collapse. But

not until Ian's there. Not until he falls to pieces like I just did.

Ian gasps. His eyes fly open. His face is filled with that near-panic of a man on the edge, the telltale *oh fuck there's no stopping it*, and then he pulls me down onto him, forcing himself as deep as I can take him, and shudders.

When he releases me, I lift myself off him and drop onto the bed beside him. He feels around, and eventually finds my hand, and we just lie there, holding hands and panting hard until we can trust our legs to hold us up. As we get up to clean ourselves off, we're shaking and clumsy, but we manage.

Ian groans as he falls back into bed. I collapse beside him.

And we just lie there. Still breathless. Still trembling. My body's aching all over; it's been years since we fucked like that. Two orgasms apiece in rapid succession? I thought we'd left that in our twenties.

"Have I ever told you," I say, barely able to enunciate, "that you're fucking amazing in bed?"

He laughs and lazily takes my hand. "Likewise."

I close my eyes and sigh. "I so needed that tonight."

"So I noticed." He pulls the sheet up over us. "I've been worried about you, you know."

My heart clenches. "I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't be sorry. I'm just worried this whole thing with Michael is taking its toll on you."

I scrub my hand over my face. "I don't see how it *won't* take its toll."

"Yeah, ditto." He pulls me close and kisses my forehead. "Is it helping, though? I mean, is he doing better?"

"Better, yeah. But, God, it's a weird feeling, being with someone who's afraid of being touched."

His fingertips trail down my arm. "I can't even imagine."

"It's like…fucking on eggshells." I rub my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. "And the more he tells me about why…" I drop my hand and look at Ian. "What the hell kind of person *does* this to someone?"

"Someone who needs to be on the evening news," Ian mutters and kisses my temple.

"Seriously." I cuddle against him, tucking my head beneath his chin. "And now I feel like an asshole too, because this whole time, I've been neglecting you."

Ian runs his hand up and down my back. "You've been preoccupied. Under the circumstances—"

"Don't." I lift up and meet his gaze. "If I've been ignoring you, don't make excuses for me."

He purses his lips, then shrugs. "Josh, something like what you're

doing with Michael is *going* to take a toll on you. And it's going to pull your focus away from us for a little while." He touches my face. "I knew that when I suggested this."

"Yeah, but I don't ever want to take you for granted or make you feel like that." I shake my head. "I don't want to do to you what—"

He kisses me, holding the back of my neck firmly. "You are not, and you never will be, anything like Steve."

I swallow. "You know what I mean."

"I do." He loosens his grasp a little and starts stroking my hair. "And right now, the one you're neglecting is yourself."

"And us."

Ian shakes his head. "You need to take care of yourself first."

I search his eyes. "Are you suggesting that I put you after myself and this thing with Michael?"

"No. I'm asking you to make yourself the priority. You keep working with Michael, and you and I will work together to make sure we're not neglecting us. If there's a problem here"—he gestures at each of us—"I'll tell you." He inclines his head. "I always have, haven't I?"

"Yeah. You have." I don't think I've ever been with a man who's less likely to let something fester—Ian is the king of nipping issues in the bud.

"I'll let you know if there's a problem," he says. "All I ask is that you do the same. And be careful, okay?"

"I will. Promise."

"Good. Because Michael needs you, but he needs you to be sane and healthy too. And that's where I come in." He combs his fingers through my hair. "You do everything you can to get him back to a good place, and I'll do everything I can to keep you in a good place. Whenever it gets to you, come to me. I've got your back."

I stare at him, struggling to comprehend what he's saying.

"I care about him too," he goes on. "I *want* you to take care of him." He brushes his lips across mine. "Just let me take care of you too. Whenever you spend an evening with him, you spend the next one with me. That way you have a chance to decompress, and whatever's happened with him, we can get it out of your system."

I shake my head and trail my fingertips along his five-o'clock shadow. "You are seriously the best husband *ever*, you know that?"

Ian laughs but doesn't say anything. He just holds me closer, and for the longest time, we just lie there, soaking up each other's body heat. Eventually, we'll get downstairs and find something to eat—and feed the animals before they revert to hunters—but for now, we don't move, and I don't object. I've always loved cuddling with Ian, and these days, I need it more than ever. I need *him* more than ever.

Tomorrow, I'll go back to Michael's bed, and I'll keep going back until he's steady on his own two feet. I'm thankful as hell that I can give him what he needs.

But especially right now, I'm grateful beyond words for Ian.

Chapter Twelve

Ian is a saint at helping me keep things balanced. A couple nights a week, I'm with Michael. Sunday evenings are wine and the hot tub with both guys. The other nights are reserved for my husband. Thanks to him, I actually have a fighting chance of keeping my sanity. When things are rough with Michael, when his ex has a hold on him and the bedroom turns into that minefield, Ian is there to ground me. That, in turn, makes it possible for me to ground Michael.

Little by little, we push Michael's boundaries. Almost a month into this, we're still barely doing more than making out and jerking each other off, though he's rather enthusiastically letting me go down on him these days. The whole process is painfully slow, and it frustrates him at every turn, but he's come a long way psychologically. The setbacks and flashbacks are fewer and farther between. And thanks to Ian, I'm still on an even keel.

Tonight, like so many other nights, I'm wrapped up in Michael, lying on our sides, kissing, stroking each other beneath the covers. My body still aches in places from everything Ian and I did less than twenty-four hours ago, and when I'm in bed with him tomorrow, I'll still feel Michael too. It's become normal, feeling the phantom touch of one man while I'm with another, and if I'm completely honest with myself, it's become addictive.

Guilt needles at me, but I try to push it aside. There's nothing wrong with enjoying this. It's sex with Michael, for God's sake, and Ian didn't give me his blessing under the condition that I lie back and think of England. And enjoying it tempers all the other emotions I have about it.

And why am I rationalizing this?

"Still awake?" Michael startles me, and when I turn my head, he's watching me.

"Yeah." I rub my eyes. Had I started drifting off? I don't even know. "Is it getting too late?"

"No. You were just quiet."

"Sorry." I lower my hand and turn toward him again. "I was just thinking."

"About?"

I hesitate. Then I shift onto my side and lift myself up on my arm. "Is it wrong that I look forward to coming over for this?"

"I would hope not." He grins. "Even with all the drama going on in my head, I wouldn't want this to be a terrible chore or something for you."

“No, it’s nothing like that. I guess… I mean…” My face burns. “I do enjoy this. Being in bed with you.”

Michael’s expression turns serious, and he strokes my hair. “Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if it should.”

He takes my left hand, runs his thumb along my wedding band, which I don’t always remember to take off. He kisses the backs of my fingers. “Ian?”

“Yeah.” I sigh and rub my face with my other hand. “I’m probably overthinking things. God knows I’ve asked him a hundred times if it bothers *him*, and Ian would never keep something like that under his hat.”

Michael holds my gaze. His eyes narrow a little, and he smiles as he traces the side of my hand with his thumb. “Well, you are a product of a Puritanical culture just like the rest of us. Maybe you’re still adjusting to the idea of bending the rules of monogamy.”

“You would think that might’ve reared its head while I was trolling bathhouses.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But promiscuity is one thing.” He lifts my hand and taps my ring. “Sleeping with someone else while your husband is at home? That’s bound to strike a few uncomfortable chords.” He lowers our joined hands.

I purse my lips. “You know, you’re probably right.” Shaking my head, I laugh and roll my eyes. “And here I was worried I wouldn’t like monogamy.”

“I never figured you would.” He smiles. “At least, not until you met Ian.”

“You definitely caught on to that before I did.”

“Well, as you’ve told me, some things are easier to see from the outside.” The hint of sadness in his voice gives me pause.

“Michael, look at what he’s done to you,” I hear myself pleading in the distant past. *“You’ve got to get out of there.”*

“I can’t just leave him.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love him!”

I release his hand and draw him into a tight embrace. “After the bullshit cards you’ve been dealt, karma owes you big-time.” I press a kiss to his forehead. “There is one hell of a guy out there waiting for you.”

Michael sighs, and when he looks up at me, he smiles. “Let’s hope.”

Hope, hell. If there isn’t a good man out there for Michael, then there’s no justice in the universe.

But, gazing into his eyes, I can’t quite form the words. So instead,

I tip his chin up, lean in and kiss him. And don't stop. And he doesn't stop either.

His arm drifts over my waist. We pull each other closer, kissing deeper and holding on tight. I should know better than to be surprised when we both start getting hard—even after we've already fooled around tonight, and even in the wake of our weird conversations, it's impossible to kiss him like this and not get turned on.

Michael grinds against me, rubbing the undersides of our cocks together. "I want you to fuck me."

"What?" My pulse goes all kinds of crazy and my panicked brain replays what happened last time we tried this. "Are you sure?"

"We can stop any time, right?"

"Any time. Always."

"Then yes. I'm sure." He pushes me onto my back and climbs on top, as if he sees right through me to that weak spot I have for his rarely seen aggressive side. "I like how we tried it before. Me on top."

I nod, sweeping my tongue across my lips. "Hell yeah. I want you in total control." As he picks up the bottle of lube off the nightstand, I add, "I can still get you ready this way. With my fingers."

"I know." He sits over me again. Holding up the bottle of lube, he grins. "Let's do this."

I laugh as I take the bottle from him and put some lube on my fingers. Steadying us both with a hand on his hip, I slip my hand between his legs, and we both exhale as I press a fingertip against him.

My finger slides in. Michael digs his teeth into his lip, his expression wavering between a wince and a look of intense concentration. He lowers himself a bit, taking my finger deeper, and then rises. After a few strokes, I carefully add a second finger. This one doesn't go in quite so easily, though. He flinches but lowers himself and takes them both.

Damn. It's just like the first time we tried this. He's way too tense—there's no way he'll take me without getting hurt.

On the way down again, Michael stops. He closes his eyes, and he takes a few slow breaths.

I touch his thigh. "You okay?"

"Yeah." His lips pull tight for a second. "I'm okay."

He starts to come down again, but I stop him with a hand on his hip. "Michael."

He meets my eyes.

"You don't have to do this," I say as gently as I can. "There's plenty of time."

He nods. "I know. I want to."

"But are you sure you're ready?"

“I won’t know until I try.”

“That’s not very encouraging. We—”

“Please.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “I *know* I can get past this.”

I’m torn between supporting him and helping him over this obstacle, and reminding him that while he can definitely get past it, he doesn’t have to do it tonight.

He starts moving again, riding my hand, but there’s no way in hell this feels good.

“Wait.” I stop him again. As much as I know it’s going to frustrate him, I slide my fingers free.

“Josh, we—”

“Let’s take a step back. We still have time.” I shake my head. “But I can’t do this yet. I’m too afraid I’m going to hurt you.”

He scowls but doesn’t protest, and eases himself down onto the bed beside me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as I reach for some tissues to clean the lube off my hand.

“I know. It’s not your fault.” He sighs. “And you’re probably right.”

Sometimes it sucks being right. I toss the tissues away and lie down beside him. “Why were you suddenly in such a hurry, anyway?”

He releases a long, resigned breath, and rubs the back of his neck, avoiding my eyes. “Honestly?”

“Yes.”

Still not looking at me, he whispers, “Because the longer we do this, the worse you’re going to feel. About Ian.”

My heart stops. “Michael. No.” I wrap my arms around him. “You’ve got a lot of trauma to get past. We’re not going to rush this just because—”

“We haven’t rushed anything.” He lifts his gaze. “We’ve crawled through this.”

“Because I don’t want to make things worse.”

“But what about you and Ian? Do you really think he agreed to this thinking we’d be at it for months?”

“He knew it would take time.”

“Still. You guys have a marriage most people would sell their souls for.” He clasps his fingers between mine. “I don’t want to damage that. Quite frankly, I’d be happier never sleeping with another man as long as it meant I didn’t fuck up what the two of you have.”

“No way.” I push myself up and kiss him softly. “Ian and I will take care of things between us. We’ll be fine. And I want you to be fine too. That’s why I’m here.”

He holds my gaze, as if searching my eyes for some kind of unspoken confirmation.

"We'll be okay." I kiss him again. "You and me, and Ian and me. I'm just sorry I made you feel like you needed to rush for my benefit."

Sighing, he shakes his head. "You didn't. I think I'm just used to…" He shakes himself again. "Never mind. Stupid shit my ex put into my head and my therapist has mostly gotten rid of. Except in here. In bed."

I smile. "That's what I'm here for. And we don't have to stop tonight. We can just take it slow."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Roll over." I nod past him. "Facing that way."

He turns onto his side, and I mold myself to his back and drape my arm over him. His body is tense, his spine rigid against my chest.

"We still have plenty of time tonight." I kiss the back of his neck. "Let's just take it slow and see where things end up."

Michael nods.

Holding him close, kissing behind his ear, I take my time. Touching him, tasting his skin, just being naked with him—we stay like this for ages. Slowly, his breathing falls into synch with mine. He covers my arm with his, resting his fingers over the top of mine as I run my hand up and down his chest, his abs, his side, his thigh.

Lying this close to him, it's only a matter of time—as we both relax, I can't help getting turned on. I try to keep my erection away from him, but Michael isn't having any of that. He scoots back against me, pressing his ass against my cock, and at the same time, he guides my hand down to his own erection. I exhale against his neck, letting him close my fingers around his cock as I start gently rubbing against his ass. Then harder. Still harder. The friction is mind-blowing as I fuck against his crack.

All the while, the room is completely silent except for the soft hiss of movement and our no longer synchronized breathing. He's not quite panting, but he's close—deep, uneven breaths, some more ragged than others.

I tug him toward me so he's lying on his back now, and I lean down to kiss his neck. "Remember how you couldn't handle me going down on you in the beginning?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You got past that." I kiss lower. The lube is close by, and I subtly move it so it'll be within reach in a moment, and keep kissing my way down his torso. As his abs contract beneath my lips, I glance up and whisper, "You'll get past this too."

"It shouldn't *be* something to get past." He hisses as I brush my lips over his hipbone.

"But it is. And you will. I promise."

He starts to speak, but as I draw the tip of my tongue along the

underside of his cock, he trails off into a moan. Sucking his cock is effortless now—every time I do it, he's more into it than before. That particular demon is a distant memory. There's no tension, no flashbacks, so I just let him enjoy this for a while, listening to him fall to pieces. I swear he's almost purring as he pushes his dick deeper into my throat.

I shift my weight onto one arm. "I'm going to add fingers. That okay?"

"Y-yeah."

I put some lube on my fingers, watching him the whole time for signs of fear, and he shows none. Instead, he's breathing hard and squirming like he does when he's turned on and desperate for an outlet.

I set the lube aside, nudge his legs apart and press a fingertip against his hole.

"Oh my God," he moans.

Stay with me, Michael.

I press harder. This time, he takes my finger easily. As I work a second one in, meeting only minimal resistance, I start on his cock again, and his long, throaty groan brings a shudder out of me.

"Holy fuck," he murmurs. "That feels amazing."

I take his cock deeper in my mouth. At the same time, I crook my fingers inside him. His cock stiffens against my tongue, and his moans reverberate across my nerve endings. More than once, I'm certain he's on the edge—arching, cursing, shuddering. I'm surprised my body isn't trembling just from the exhilaration of hearing and feeling him surrender like this.

"Josh." He moans again. "Fuck me."

My skin prickles and my balls tighten. "Are you—"

"*Yes*."

I withdraw my fingers, and Michael bites his lip and writhes on the mattress, clawing at the sheets as he does.

"Please," he murmurs. "Fuck me. Oh my God, I want you."

I can barely breathe but manage to whisper, "Likewise." Though my heart is racing with apprehension as well as arousal, I put some lube on me and on him and sit up between his legs.

I press against him. He's tense again, so I start to back off, but he grabs my arm.

"No." He licks his lips. "Just go slow. I want this."

"You'll tell me if it hurts?"

Michael nods vigorously. "Definitely. Just don't *stop*."

"I won't unless you tell me to." I hesitate a few seconds longer and then apply just a little more pressure. He's tight, but not like he was that first time we tried this, when he could barely take me at all.

“Breathe, Michael,” I whisper, still leaning against him, though not quite enough to push in. “I won’t hurt you. Ever. I only want you to feel good.”

Michael swallows.

“There’s no hurry. Breathe.”

He takes in a long breath through his nose. Lets it out slowly. Draws another. Starts to let that one go.

Then he bears down.

And the head of my cock is inside him.

And we both stop.

My eyes water. My balance wobbles, but I grip his legs to keep myself steady.

“Fuck…” He stares up at the ceiling with unfocused eyes. “Holy…”

I gently press in farther, and his helpless whimper makes my cock even harder. “This good?”

“So good.” He bites his lip as I work myself deeper. Before long, I’m moving easily, and he’s taking every inch of my cock without that impossible resistance from before.

“Tell me how,” I breathe. “Hard? Slow?”

“Slow at first.” Michael closes his eyes and arches beneath me. “Just…want to enjoy it.”

Oh, I’ll let you enjoy it as long as you want.

I ride him as slowly as I can stand it. He’s still tight, but with every motion of my hips, he’s relaxing. Yielding to me. Taking me deep, biting his lip whenever I pull out and whimpering softly every time I push back in.

“Is this—”

“M-more.” Michael’s eyes are closed, and he’s stroking himself in time with my slow, fluid motions. “You feel…so good.”

“So do you.” I rock my hips a little faster. Not quite thrusting, but giving him more than before, and he groans as he tightens around me.

“Oh my *God*,” he breathes. “So…good…”

“Fuck, yeah. I could—oh *fuck*!” My climax catches me completely off guard. One second I’m taking my sweet time, enjoying the slick, fluid strokes, and the next, I can’t breathe. I can’t get deep enough inside him. I throw my head back, my hips jerking and toes curling and my vision blurring as release takes over, and then I slump over him with just enough presence of mind to avoid resting my full weight on his chest.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, pulling out carefully. “That was, uh, unexpected.”

He laughs, letting his fingertips drift up my back, which my suddenly sensitive nerve endings can barely handle. I shiver hard and,

without thinking about it, grab his arm and pin it to the bed. Panic prickles the back of my neck. Oh God.

But Michael moans softly and presses his hard cock against me. “If you’re gonna be like that, I might have to fuck *you*.”

I lift up and blink in surprise.

He grins. “Please?”

“I’m not gonna say no. Are you—” But I don’t need to ask if he’s sure. Whatever hang-ups he had earlier, they’re gone now, and his eyes are filled with more boldness and certainty than I’ve seen in… hell, years.

“Get on your back.” He pulls me down for a quick kiss. “I like this position.”

“M-me too.” A lot. Holy fuck. Especially when my limbs are still made of rubber. “Go easy, though. Just came.”

“Of course.” He reaches for the lube, and I roll onto my back. After he’s lubed himself up, he positions himself. Twin crevices form between his eyebrows as he steadies his cock with one hand and guides himself to me. He presses against me, glances up to meet my gaze, and a little grin appears on his lips right as he pushes forward. I push back, and for the first time in so many years, Michael’s inside me. And I didn’t know how much I wanted that, how much I’d missed that, until just now, and as he works himself deeper, my eyes sting.

Aside from the winter when we discovered this in the first place, we never fucked much when we were teens—we enjoyed giving head more than anything. But when we first discovered it, we couldn’t get enough, and when we did it, it was always mind-blowing. Gazing up at him now, I hope his mind is going someplace else tonight, and I hope it’s going to the same place mine is. Back to that winter when this was as easy as it was new. When anal was still a novelty, and we seized every opportunity to fuck each other senseless. I savor every stroke, my body lethargic and tingling from the orgasm I just had, while he’s carefully sliding in and out, well on his way to his own orgasm and still making sure he doesn’t overstimulate me now that I’m this hypersensitive. Just like we did back then.

Michael picks up speed. His eyes are heavy-lidded, nearly closed, and he’s fucking beautiful—skin gleaming with sweat, red hair damp and disheveled, lips parted as if he’d be moaning if he could just remember how.

“Come here,” I whisper, and his eyes open. He meets my gaze as I reach for him, and he comes down to me, and then we’re kissing, and moving, and holding each other, and this is beyond perfect. I’m distantly aware of obstacles we still need to work through, but there is nothing about this moment I’d change.

Michael breaks the kiss and buries his head against my neck. His

thrusts aren't faster, but they're definitely harder, and though they border on too much for my overstimulated body, they feel good. They feel amazing. And every time his breath hitches or his rhythm falters, I know he's getting closer, and I can't help moaning myself, because *holy fuck, Michael…*

He pulls in a breath. His whole body tenses, but not like all the times he's freaked out. I roll my hips, clench around him, hold him tight, and he exhales hard against my neck just before he thrusts all the way in and groans. Then, like I did earlier, he collapses. He withdraws but otherwise doesn't move.

"That went better than I expected," I whisper.

"Yeah. Same here." He cups my cheek and kisses me tenderly. "Kinda reminds me of the first time we did this."

My heart skips. "Me too." *Quite possibly in more ways than it should.* But I banish that thought. "And it was good for you? Nothing bothering you from the past?"

"Not this time. It was…" He meets my gaze, and his smile does a number on my pulse. "It was perfect."

I just smile back and run my fingers through his hair.

"I know this has been rough on you." He kisses me again and barely breaks that kiss enough to murmur, "But thank you."

"You're welcome, Michael."

Chapter Thirteen

After that, we can't stop fucking. Between him and my insatiable husband, it's a wonder I can walk over the next week or so, and I love it. The sex is getting better and better, and so is Michael's confidence.

I've been here more times than I can count now, hard and breathless in Michael's bed, but it feels different tonight.

We've been tangled up together almost since the moment I walked in the front door. That kiss hello didn't stop, and then I had him up against the wall and he was unbuckling my belt. We barely made it down the hallway to his bedroom without tumbling to the carpet and just tearing each other's clothes off right then and there.

And now we're here, struggling to shed clothes as we kiss and grope the way we used to when we were teenagers, back when we'd first discovered sex and couldn't get naked fast enough. When we still had to sneak around and had to make the absolute most out of every stolen opportunity.

We have all the time in the world tonight, but I can't get enough of him. I want him naked, I want his cock in my mouth, I want to fuck him, I want him to fuck me—I just want him.

"Got some more lube," he says between kisses. "We were getting low."

"Already?" I grin against his lips. "Guess we have been going through it pretty fast."

"Uh-huh. And I want to get started on this bottle. Like now."

I push him onto his back and press my cock against his. "I think we should get started on it too. And I want you just like this."

"Yes please." He drags me down to him, gripping my arms painfully tight as he kisses me. Even as we fumble around for that bottle of lube, and as we struggle to remove the cellophane around the top, we're all over each other. Every kiss breaks with whispered cursing, and every new one starts with groans of relief and pleasure. I can't get enough of him, and he's matching me kiss for kiss, grope for grope, and when that bottle comes open, it's a miracle we don't wind up with lube spilled everywhere. Though at this point, I can't convince myself that'd be a bad thing—then we could just keep kissing until one of us slides into the other. Or something. Fuck. I can't even think.

Michael's lips separate from mine. "Finally." He holds up the lube bottle, grinning triumphantly now that it's open and unsealed.

"P-put it on."

He almost drops the bottle, but catches it, and when he closes a slippery hand around my dick, I'm surprised I don't pass out. And

we're kissing again. Breathlessly. I thought he was going to fuck me, but now I'm the one with lube on my cock, and he's stroking me like this just turned into a hand job instead, and I'm completely okay with that.

Anything you want, Michael. Just don't stop.

He stops, though, and nudges me, so I lift my hips. He spreads his legs, and we both exhale as I come down between them. With some more fumbling, clumsiness that would've mortified me in my younger days but doesn't bother me in the slightest now, we guide my cock to his ass, and I push in. He's tight since we haven't done a thing to prep him so far, but he slowly relaxes, and I sink into him. After some careful strokes, he's taking me easily, and I start moving faster. Fucking him effortlessly, as if there's never been any physical or mental resistance.

Something's definitely changed tonight. With every stroke and every touch, I've been sure he's going to recoil or tense up, but he hasn't. As I thrust inside him, he holds onto my arms, digging his nails in and rocking his hips to encourage me to fuck him harder, and there's no sign of anything in his expression besides pure lust.

And slowly, it becomes clear why tonight feels different—though Steve is there in the back of my mind, he isn't *here*. For the first time, it's only Michael and me.

He meets my eyes, grabs the back of my neck, and pulls me down into a kiss. Between kissing him and fucking him, I can't find nearly enough oxygen, but I don't care. I'm more than happy to black out if this is the last thing I feel before everything goes dark.

"You feel so good," he whispers.

"So do you. God, Michael, you feel amazing."

He grips my arms tighter. "Harder." He doesn't have to tell me twice. I bury my head against his neck, slide my hands under him, hold on to his shoulders and I fuck him hard, the way he always begged me to when we were younger.

He's damn near sobbing, egging me on with slurred curses and sharp gasps. Arms around me, he drags his nails down my back, carving lines of delicious burning pain that spur me on.

Then he pulls in a sharp breath. His entire body goes rigid, his muscles tense, his fingers digging hard into my back and his ass so tight around my dick I can barely move, but I keep right on fucking him anyway.

All at once, he lets go. He releases his breath, and he releases me, and hot semen's hitting my chest and stomach, and then I'm coming too, driven by his soft little moans and the way he's trembling beneath me.

With a sigh, I slump over him, holding myself up on shaking arms.

Somehow, I manage to pull out, but otherwise, I don't move. Eyes closed, body trembling all over, I rest my forehead against his shoulder and just breathe.

"Oh my God," he murmurs after a while.

"Yeah. My thoughts exactly." Though it's a struggle, I push myself up.

When Michael meets my eyes, there's definitely an extra shine in his, but the smile tells me it's not a bad thing this time. He reaches up with both hands, draws me back down and kisses me so tenderly, he almost moves me to tears too. Then he breaks the kiss and wraps his arms around me, and this time, a couple of hot tears slip free.

Your ex really wasn't here tonight, was he?

It was just us.

Finally.

Our gazes meet again. He smiles. So do I. We both wipe our eyes and, without a word, pry ourselves apart to clean up.

Moments later, we're lying in bed again, facing each other on our sides.

He closes his eyes and smiles serenely. "Jesus. I honestly never thought I'd like it that much again."

I kiss his forehead. "I knew we'd get there."

His eyes open and his expression darkens a little. "So now comes the next hard part."

"Which is…?"

He swallows. "Being okay with all of this when it's someone I've never been with before."

My chest tightens. I hadn't even thought about that part.

"There's always Dr. Klein." He sighs. "Except what if we get to this point and it doesn't work?"

"Michael." I stroke his cheek. "If you get to this point with him, and he can't be patient and accommodating, then he has no business being in bed with you anyway."

"True. I don't know. I'm not sure I'm quite ready for that yet."

"Then don't push it." I kiss him gently. "We can do this as long as you need to."

"You're the best," he murmurs, wrapping his arms around me. "You've made such a difference."

I kiss him again and hold on to him. "Anything I can do to help. I want you to be able to enjoy this again."

"I already do." He smiles up at me, but it fades. "Maybe one of these days, I'll even get to where I can go down on someone again."

My heart sinks. Ah, yes. The one thing he hasn't even tried to face down yet.

I study him. "He really traumatized you with that, didn't he?"

Gaze distant, Michael nods. He gnaws his lip, his brow furrowed as if he wants to speak, but doesn't know what to say.

As much as I don't want to kill the mood and send him back, maybe the answers will shed some light on why this is such a battle for him at every turn. My mouth is starting to go dry as I finally ask the question that's been echoing in my head since day one: "What did he do to you?"

"A lot of things I'd just as soon never talk about again." He gulps. "But oral was his favorite form of punishment."

My stomach turns. "Punishment?"

"Yeah." Michael's lips twist.

I don't push. Something tells me I won't have to.

Michael draws a slow, deep breath. "One night, we were arguing about something—I don't remember what—and he backhanded me."

I hold Michael tighter. Jesus Christ.

He goes on, "It wasn't the first time, and it definitely wasn't the last, but that night, my tooth caught the inside of my cheek. It was one of those cuts that just bled *everywhere*. Not a deep one or one that needed medical attention, but…you know what I mean."

I nod, tamping down the nausea in my throat.

"Anyway, it finally stopped. And we finally calmed down." Michael's eyes grow distant, but he squeezes my hand, as if he's letting himself go back to that place as long as he's got an anchor in this one. I squeeze back. With a subtle shudder, he continues. "He was starting to sober up too, so he decided he wanted to take things into the bedroom to"—he made air quotes with his other hand—"put the fight behind us. One thing led to another, and I was…" He gulps, and shifts as if he's trying not to shudder again. "On my knees. Which is where I always ended up when we were making up."

He runs his tongue alongside his teeth, as if he's searching the inside of his cheek for a phantom cut. I cringe at the idea of sucking cock like that.

Michael clears his throat. "He got a little rough, and I felt the cut come open again, but he wouldn't stop and wouldn't let *me* stop until after he came."

My stomach lurches. "Fucking bastard."

"Yeah. So of course, my mouth was bleeding, which meant there was blood on him." Michael rolls his eyes. "He freaked the fuck out."

"Even though he was the one who cut your mouth and wouldn't stop."

"Yep. It was actually kind of a blessing in disguise."

"A—*what?*"

"He was kind of a germaphobe, and even though we'd both been tested a million times over, he was absolutely certain we both needed

to be tested *right fucking now* for HIV." He laughs bitterly. "Like he thought the virus would spontaneously manifest now that he'd come in contact with my blood."

I arch my eyebrow. "And that was a blessing, how?"

"Because he wouldn't touch me until the tests came back." Michael closes his eyes and scrubs his hand over his face. "The first few days, I felt horrible. Rejected, abandoned. But the longer it went on, the more I realized my body didn't hurt anymore, and I was sleeping better because I didn't have to worry about waking up to…" He pauses, then shudders. "Anyway. I think that was when I realized I needed to get out."

My mouth has gone completely dry. "How long after that did you leave him?"

Michael stares up at the ceiling, and his voice is hollow as he whispers, "Two years."

"Holy shit."

He exhales. "That incident wasn't an isolated one, let's put it that way. He fucked up my jaw a few times. And my gag reflex." Pinching the bridge of his nose, he says, "He took it personally once when I said I needed two or three weeks before I could go down on him again. He decided that wasn't acceptable, and, well, didn't give me much choice." Michael lowers his hand and meets my eyes. "Apparently having your wisdom teeth out isn't a good enough excuse."

I'm surprised my mouth doesn't literally hurt just hearing that. "I think that would put me off blowjobs for the rest of my life too."

Michael's lips tighten, and he nods. "Lucky for me, the blood put him off that time too. But damn." He shakes his head.

"I can't even imagine."

"You don't want to." He inhales deeply through his nose, then lets it out slowly. "It wasn't that horrible all the time. Honestly, we had good sex more often than not. But if he got drunk, or if he got pissed at me for something, all bets were off." He closes his eyes. "And here we are."

I slide my hand up his arm to his shoulder. "And you've come a long way. There's no way in hell someone's going to do that to you again."

"He won't get away with five fucking years of it, anyway."

"He does it once," I growl, "they'll never find the body."

He meets my eyes, and smiles. "If it happens again, I'll definitely take you up on that this time." Then he scowls. "So, you can see why blowjobs are such an issue."

"Yeah. Definitely." I kiss the top of his shoulder. "Question is, how do we get you past that?"

Michael sighs. "Fuck if I know. Because with this one, there's two

things I need to get over. One, I'm afraid I'm going to get hurt. Physically. Two, I can't even think about doing it without feeling like I'm being punished or degraded. Even when I know that's not the case."

"I can see why." I gently draw him into my arms, rolling onto my back so he can rest his head on my shoulder. As we settle, I stroke his hair. "Give it time. It took time to get to where you are tonight, but you made it. You'll get past this, and you'll be able to be with other guys." I kiss his forehead. "And I'm not going anywhere until you do."

"Thank you."

And God help any man who so much as looks at you the wrong way.

Chapter Fourteen

Nothing caps off a weekend and gets me ready for another week of drudgery like kicking back with the guys in the hot tub. We toast the fading weekend and the coming week, and relax.

"One of these days," Michael says, sinking in up to his chin and holding up his glass to keep it out of the water, "I am so moving into a place with a hot tub like this."

"You looking to move?" Ian asks.

Michael shrugs. "I've thought about it. I do like where I'm living now, though. It's just tempting to move somewhere with a yard for Cody and, well"—he grins—"a hot tub."

I chuckle. "They're a pain in the ass."

"So are you," Ian says with a smirk. "But you're worth the maintenance."

"Hey!" I playfully kick him under the water, and he laughs and splashes me. Then I turn to Michael again. "If you're thinking of buying, I can hook you up with the realtor who found us this place."

Michael nods. "I'll keep it in mind. Honestly, I do like my place. And the rent is good, but maybe when I finish off my student loans, I'll start thinking about it." With a quiet laugh, he adds, "I'm not sure if it's a good idea for me to buy a place, though."

"Why's that?" Ian asks.

"Because at the moment, the only thing keeping me from having forty-seven dogs and a bunch of cats is my landlord's pet policy."

"Oh, good point." Ian swirls his glass. "You could always buy in one of those places with a homeowner's association. I mean, they're annoying as hell, but they would put a cap on how many critters you can have."

"True, true. I don't know. Maybe I just need a big chunk of property out in the sticks. The commute would suck, but I'd have room for more than one dog."

"Let me guess." I arch my eyebrow. "So you can have a whole army of horses?"

"And goats."

"And goats. Of course."

Michael laughs. He brings his glass toward his lips, but pauses. "Oh, Ian, I mean to ask. How are your feet doing?"

"Much better," Ian says. "The massage sure helped, and I've been sitting as much as I can during my lectures. Having the summer off should finish the job."

I pat his arm. "Soon."

“Not soon enough,” he grumbles and picks up his glass. “Good thing I’ve got Dionysus to get me through the rest of the year.”

“Nerd,” I say under my breath.

He snorts. “Oh please. You say that like you don’t get turned on listening to me read the classics out loud.”

Michael almost spits out his wine. “Say what?”

“It’s true.” Ian drains his glass. As he reaches for the bottle, he adds, “Isn’t it, Josh?”

My face burns. “Only because you read it like you’re reading erotica. It could be the damned phone book and it’d have the same effect.”

“Hmm. Might have to try—oh shit!” Ian turns the bottle over above his glass, but only a few drops spill out. “Gentlemen, I believe we’re out of wine.”

“*Again?*” Michael scoffs. “Why does this keep *happening*?”

I set my glass on the edge. “We should just move the wine rack out here. For convenience.”

“What?” Ian rolls his eyes. “The temperature would be all wrong. That’s why we bought a house with a wine cellar, remember?”

“Right, right.” I nod toward the house. “That’s also why you get to go get it.”

“Of course.” He kisses my cheek and stands. “More of the same?”

Michael raises his mostly empty glass. “Definitely. This stuff is great.”

“Beats the hell out of the stuff you brought last weekend.”

“Hey. *Hey*.” Michael huffs and rolls his eyes. “Excuse me for wanting to try something new.”

“Oh, it was a valiant effort, but…” Ian wrinkles his nose as he stands and wades toward the side so he can get out. “A for effort, I guess?”

“Mmhmm. Shall we talk about the pitiful excuse for a shiraz you brought out here before Christmas?”

I can’t help gagging at the memory. “Oh my God. He wins, Ian. Nothing will ever out-disgusting that bottle.”

“Fair enough. Touché, Michael.” Ian laughs and playfully claps Michael’s shoulder as he gets out of the tub.

And Michael isn’t fazed at all. He chuckles and takes another drink, but he doesn’t draw away. Doesn’t jump. Barely seems to notice that Ian touched him at all, never mind on uncovered skin. It shouldn’t be a surprise after that foot massage a while back, but it *does* get me thinking.

Michael meets my eyes and cocks his head. “What?”

“You don’t seem to mind being touched anymore.” I nod toward Ian just before he disappears into the kitchen. “Even with him.”

"I—well, not with either of you guys."

I smile. "Good. That's good. You used to flinch even from us."

His eyes lose focus for a moment, and then he smiles too. "I guess you're right."

I absently swirl what's left of my wine. "Remember how we talked about you being concerned about getting into bed with a guy you've never been with before?"

"Mmhmm."

"Maybe there's an easier step you could take first. With someone you know and trust but haven't slept with before."

Michael's about to take a sip of wine but freezes, staring at me. Then his eyes dart toward the house, and he nearly drops the glass in the water. "Wait, do you mean—"

"Yes, I do." I shrug, eyeing the kitchen door in case Ian starts heading back this way, and as I speak, tick off the points on my fingers. "You know him. You seem to be okay with touching him and him touching you. And I can vouch for him being completely sane and safe in the bedroom." I lower my hand back into the water. "It's something we can think about. Doesn't have to happen tonight."

Michael watches the kitchen door. "Actually, I like the idea. And the sooner the better—I want these demons out of my head. Ian's the perfect guy for this if he's on board." He pauses, avoiding my eyes for a second. "I, uh, was kind of thinking of suggesting him myself."

"Really?"

"Really." He moistens his lips. "Do you think he'll want to?"

"Not sure. I thought he was allergic to anything besides monogamy until recently, so anything's possible."

"Worth a shot."

The sliding glass door opens. Ian's on his way back now.

Michael and I exchange glances.

"It can wait," I say quietly.

He shakes his head. "No. I'm in." As he watches Ian cross the yard, dressed only in soaked black swim trunks and carrying a bottle of wine, he grins. "I'm definitely in."

I chuckle. "Dirty bastard."

"Not my fault you married a hot guy." He winks.

"Can't argue with that. But—" I glance at Ian, who's nearly at the gazebo, and whisper, "You sure?"

Michael nods.

Ian slips back into the water and tops off all our glasses. As he takes his spot beside me, everyone swirls, sips, swallows, but nobody speaks. The silence drags on, and it's quickly getting conspicuous.

Ian eyes us both suspiciously. "What? You two are quiet all of a sudden." He gives me a good-natured glare. "Did I interrupt a Walking

Dead conversation?"

Michael laughs. "No, not quite."

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"Then…?" Ian's forehead creases.

"Uh…" Michael looks at me, eyebrows up. *You got this?*

I guess it makes sense for me to be the one to bring it up. Good thing I'm so great at improv. Wait. Fuck.

I clear my throat. "So, um. About this, uh, arrangement Michael and I have right now."

Ian arches an eyebrow. "Mmhmm?"

I glance at Michael. He nods before taking a deep swallow of wine, and I turn to my husband. "Would you be game to join us?"

"Join—" Ian's eyes have never been wider. "*Join you?*" He turns to Michael. Then me. Michael again. "Spell this out for me."

"Well, we started all this because Michael's been with me before. And now he's comfortable with me again, but that doesn't necessarily mean he'll be okay with someone completely new."

Michael nods. "So maybe a stepping stone would be someone I know but have never been with."

Ian blinks. "Like me?"

"Yeah." Michael cringes a little. "This all sounds insane. If you're not interested, it won't hurt my feelings. I'll find a way to get over all —"

"I didn't say I wasn't interested," Ian says softly. He turns to me. "You're sure about this?"

"I'd be a bit of a hypocrite if I wasn't, don't you think?"

"Still…"

I take Ian's hand beneath the water. "It's ultimately Michael's decision who he's comfortable with, but as far as whether I'm okay with you doing it? I can't imagine anyone I'd trust more. Especially under the circumstances."

Ian turns to Michael. "And you'd really want me?"

Michael nods, and a sheepish little grin forms. "Quite a bit, to be honest."

Ian's blushing now too. "Oh. Wow. Uh, how does…" He clears his throat. "How do we even start? I'm not exactly a virgin, but I've never had anything start out like this."

I laugh. "I guess it *is* a bit weird."

"Well," Michael says, "we could start out with, you know, kissing or something." His cheeks get a little redder, even though they're already flushed from the wine and the hot tub. "If we like that, we take it from there." He rubs the bridge of his nose and laughs. "My God. We sound like kids playing Spin the Bottle for the first time."

"Eh, I can think of worse ways to break the ice." Ian eyes us both,

lips quirked slightly as if he's mulling it over. Then he shrugs and sets his glass on the edge. "All right. I'm not going to say no." He glances at me, eyebrows up like he's waiting for me to shout April Fools! When I don't, he takes a breath, moves across the tub and sits beside Michael.

Michael drains his glass. He puts it aside, shoots me a quick glance and then turns to Ian. Their eyes lock. My heart speeds up. Didn't I just bring this up like two minutes ago? And they're already looking at each other like that?

Ian rests his hand on Michael's shoulder. They inch closer to each other, holding each other's gazes and holding their breath, and I realize I'm not breathing either. Michael's hand slides up Ian's chest and snakes around the back of his neck. Ian tilts his head a little. Closer. Closer. Almost touching.

They stop. Neither pulls away, but they don't move either—as if they're each daring the other to cross the last little gap. My heart could not possibly beat any faster. This is a bad idea, isn't it?

And both suddenly burst out laughing and separate.

Panic and relief both shoot through my veins—what the hell happened? Okay, it didn't turn into a flashback or something for Michael. But…?

Ian lets his face fall into his dripping hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Me too." Michael rolls his eyes. "I don't even know what's funny."

"Neither do I." Ian glares at the two wine bottles. "What did you *do* to us, you bastards?"

All three of us laugh this time, partly out of genuine amusement and partly because, at least in my case, I'm worried as fuck about how this thing might play out. We definitely jumped from discussion to execution way too fast—time to rein it back and talk about it before it blows up in our faces.

I open my mouth to speak, but Ian beats me to it.

"I'm really sorry." He clears his throat, and his tone is completely serious when he continues. "It's just…"

"Nerves?" Michael asks.

"Just a bit."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Look, I really do want to do this. If you think it's going to help you move on, then…" Ian twists around, facing him fully. "I want to follow your lead. What do we do?"

"One thing at a time, I guess." Michael lifts his hand out of the water and reaches for Ian. He pauses, his fingers hovering tentatively as droplets fall in the water right in front of Ian's chest. They lock eyes again, and Michael moves in closer, this time meeting Ian's face with

his fingertips.

I chew the inside of my cheek. *We should talk this through.*

But Michael's drawing Ian closer. They're touching, looking at each other—and like Ian, I want to follow Michael's lead. So with my heart in my throat, I watch and hope for the best.

Ian runs the backs of his fingers along the edge of Michael's jaw. "You can trust me. I would never in a million years—"

"I know." Michael smiles, but there's tension written all over his tight lips and in his eyes. "It's PTSD, though. There's nothing rational when that shit kicks in."

Ian gulps. "What do you want me to do, then?"

Michael shivers, eyes flicking toward Ian's lips. "I really want you to kiss me."

Ian's other hand rests on Michael's arm, though I can't decide if he's steadying him, slowing him down, or keeping it there in case he suddenly wants to push him back. "Are you… Is this…" He glances at me, eyebrows pinched together. Facing Michael again, he whispers, "I don't want to make things worse for you."

And right then and there, I thank God for the man I married—he's as concerned about Michael as I have been from the beginning, and if ever there was someone I could trust with Michael, it's definitely him.

"You won't make it worse." Michael's features relax, and he combs his fingers through Ian's dark hair.

Ian isn't convinced, though, and draws back. "I…"

"We can stop any time, right?" Michael asks.

"Of course!"

Michael's smile melts my knees, and he cups Ian's jaw. "Then you won't make it worse. As long as we can stop, it'll be fine." Now he draws back, though, his smile fading. "But I don't want to do this if *you* don't want to."

"It's not a question of wanting to." Ian exhales, running his hand along Michael's forearm. "Trust me. I definitely want to."

"Me too."

They hold each other's gazes. After a moment, Ian's lips curve into a grin. Then Michael's do the same. He leans in, and Ian mirrors him, and I hold my breath, not sure if this is going to be the hottest thing imaginable or a hot mess.

Good God, they're really doing this. Drawing each other in, gazes darting from eyes to parted lips and back—*please, please, don't let this backfire.*

They're both all smiles and confidence right up until they're close enough to kiss, and then they slow down. Michael bites his lip. Ian's forehead creases.

Damn it. Another attempt to move too far, too fast, and it'll only

be a setback that'll—

Michael kisses Ian.

And my glass nearly tumbles into the water.

Michael grips the sides of Ian's neck in both hands, as if he's afraid Ian will pull away. At first, I'm certain Ian will. His spine's rigid, and his shoulders tense as if he's about to bolt. Then he wraps one arm around Michael. And the other. His hand slides up to cradle the back of Michael's head, and…

Wow.

One second, he's hesitating.

The next, Ian tilts his head and moves in for more. His cheek hollows. Michael's jaw relaxes. Across the tub, my balls tighten because I know how *both* men feel and taste when they kiss that deeply.

They pull apart and stare at each other. Both are out of breath.

No need to ask for a verdict. Their eyes say it all even before Michael licks his lips and Ian shivers.

"I have to say," Michael murmurs, "that wine tastes even better like this."

"No arguments here," Ian growls, and kisses Michael again, harder this time. Together, they shift around, and Michael's suddenly in Ian's lap, straddling him. Without breaking the kiss, he grasps Ian's wrist and guides it beneath the water. My blood pressure soars. Ian groans as Michael inhales sharply through his nose. Ian's shoulder dips. Rises. Dips again. Michael shudders, digging his fingers into Ian's arm. I can't see Ian's hand below the surface, but whatever he's doing is driving Michael insane.

For all I know, they've forgotten I'm here, but I'm totally okay with that. There is officially nothing in the world hotter than watching my husband and my best friend making out in a hot tub. Jesus. Why didn't we think of this years ago?

Because Michael wasn't ready for it.

A chill cuts through the warmth of arousal and the hot tub, and memories flood my mind. How this all started with him. How he shied away from me. How he still flashes back sometimes when things get intense.

But…there he is. After the briefest possible conversation about it, he's in. Arms around my husband, rubbing against him and kissing him as if that earlier flinch and all the ones before it never even happened.

Michael tilts his head back, and my skin tingles as Ian takes the cue and kisses his way down that beautiful bared neck.

"So, um." Michael turns to me as Ian damn near bites him. "Yeah. That, uh, this'll work."

“You don’t say.” Shit, even I’m out of breath.

“I think we should go upstairs,” Ian murmurs against Michael’s throat. “Because I really, *really* want to suck his dick.”

Panic shoots through me—Michael’s okay with me going down on him, but Ian?

Michael drags his nails across Ian’s shoulder. “In that case, we should definitely go upstairs. Or else your neighbors are going to get a show.”

Relief replaces panic.

And then arousal takes over. Nothing but pure, electric arousal.

Holy fuck, this is going to be hot.

Chapter Fifteen

We wait until we're inside to slip off our swim trunks. Our privacy fence keeps out most prying eyes, but it'd be just our luck that the night someone decided to look would be the night we'd traipse naked into the house with hard-ons and a third guy. So, in the interest of keeping neighborhood barbecues from getting awkward, we step into the laundry room and peel off what little clothing we have on.

On the way upstairs, Ian steals a glance at Michael. Michael steals one at him as we step into the bedroom. And in the split second I turn away to close the door, they're kissing. I don't know who grabbed who, or who's in control, or what, but the two most gorgeous men in the universe are naked, dripping wet and kissing next to my bed.

At first, all I can do is stare. I've fantasized about this plenty of times over the years but never imagined it would actually happen, and now, there they are. Soaked. Naked. Erect.

And why the hell am I just staring?

As I come closer, they break the kiss and turn to me, both grinning. They start to let each other go, but I put up my hands.

"No, no. Don't stop on my behalf." I lower myself to my knees beside them. "I can keep my mouth busy." Closing my fingers around each of their cocks, I add, "Hands too."

"He's good at that," Ian murmurs.

"Mmhmm," Michael says. "Really good."

Ian might've had a smart remark or something to add, but then I've got his cock in my mouth, and the only sound he makes is a soft whimper, which Michael promptly muffles.

I switch back and forth from Ian's cock to Michael's while they kiss above me. Someone's hand is in my hair. Someone groans. I can't tell one from the other, and there's something ridiculously hot about that. It's been years since I've had a threesome, and I've never imagined I'd actually have one with these two. This is going to be *amazing*. It already is.

Please don't let this night end. Ever.

Michael's hips rock. Fingers twitch against my scalp—they must be his, since they're encouraging me to take him deeper in my throat.

"We should…" He pauses, and when I glance up, he's kissing Ian again. Then he breaks away. "Bed. Before I fucking collapse."

"Good idea," Ian says.

I release them both, and they each extend an arm to me. My legs are a little tingly from kneeling for so long, but they still work, and with help from the guys, I manage to get upright and onto the bed.

Michael winds up in the middle, and he's barely horizontal before Ian and I both start on him. I kiss his mouth while Ian starts down his neck, and I lose track of Ian after that. All I'm aware of is Michael's kiss, his hot body next to mine, his hand finding—and now stroking, oh God—my cock. Hands and mouths are everywhere. Skin on skin. Fingers in hair. Teasing nipples, stroking cocks, nipping skin here and there—I've never been in bed with two men as passionate as these two at the same time, and every second promises to drive me out of my mind.

Ian starts kissing his way down Michael's chest. He did say he wanted to suck Michael's dick, and my whole body is on fire just imagining the sight of it.

Michael bites his lip and squirms. "Fuck…"

Then Ian kisses above Michael's navel.

And Michael sucks in a sharp breath.

His body goes stiff. My blood goes cold.

Ian and I both lift our heads.

And there they are—Michael's nerves.

"You all right?" Ian asks.

"Michael?" I touch his face.

He closes his eyes, and the breath he draws this time is deep but controlled. Steady. He inhales, puts his hand over the top of mine on his face and exhales slowly.

"Easy," I whisper. "It's just us. Just you, me and Ian."

Ian comes back up and eases himself down beside Michael. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Michael shakes himself and opens his eyes. "Oral is a weird thing for me. I should've said something."

Ian glances at me, eyebrows up. *What do I do?*

"Do you want him to try again?" I ask Michael. "Or hold off for tonight?"

Michael scowls. "I want you to," he says to Ian. "God, I do. But…" He shivers, lips pulling tight as he does, and I caress his face again.

"It's just us," I remind him. "Nothing has to happen. You're not obligated to do anything."

"I know." Michael inhales. Exhales. Opens his eyes. Then he licks his lips and grins sheepishly. "I know. I'm sorry. It's this—"

"Don't apologize." Ian kisses Michael's forehead. "This is a new thing. I'm new to you."

"You are. But I like this. Just have to get past—" Michael taps his temple.

"Take all the time you need. There's absolutely no hurry. Tonight or any other night."

"Thank you." Michael curves his hand around the back of Ian's

neck, and he kisses him. Gently at first, but then they both come back for more. Michael opens to him, and Ian takes the invitation, deepening the kiss as Michael's hand drifts lower. When Michael starts stroking Ian's cock, Ian groans and kisses him even harder, and Michael gives as good as he gets—oh yeah, he's definitely back.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. Not just the fact that my husband and best friend are kissing and turning each other on, but that Michael's actually okay. His nerves have raised their heads, but he's tamped them down, and *fast*. I can't help smiling as I watch the two of them kiss—Michael's definitely come further than he thought. Of course I'm not surprised he trusts Ian, but his demons showed up when it was just him and me too, so they were bound to make an appearance or two tonight. The fact that he's banished them so quickly, and recovered enough to get back in the game after just a moment of calming himself down—he can't possibly know that's nearly moving me to tears.

You really are back, aren't you?

Oblivious to me, Ian breaks the kiss and meets Michael's eyes. "All of this is at your speed. Whatever you want to do."

"Good," Michael pants against Ian's lips. "Because right now, I want to fuck you."

Ian and I both stare at him. My heart goes haywire—Ian's not much of a bottom, though he's not opposed to it, but it's this aggressiveness from Michael that turns me on like *whoa*. And blows my mind in the wake of that brief setback.

"You're sure you're ready for that?" I ask.

Michael's gaze stays fixed on Ian. "Yeah." He strokes Ian's cock, biting his lip when Ian shudders and curses. To me, Michael says, "I'm definitely ready for it."

"Thank fuck," Ian says. "So am I." He kisses him again, briefly this time. "There's lube next to the bed." He grins. "How do you want me?"

"Depends." Michael's eyes gleam with lust. "You want it hard or slow?"

Ian shivers. "Is that even a question?" The grin broadens. "*Hard*."

I'm surprised Michael doesn't come right then and there. Hell, I'm surprised *I* don't.

"If you really want it hard"—Michael nods toward the foot of the bed—"get on your hands and knees." To me, he says, "Could you hand me the lube, please?"

Despite my hands forgetting how they're supposed to work, I somehow manage to get him the lube from the nightstand without dropping it.

Ian gets on his hands and knees and holds on to the footboard. I

lie down beside him, holding myself up on my elbow, and watch, my pulse soaring as Michael kneels behind Ian with the bottle of lube in his hand.

Michael puts some lube on himself. He inhales sharply—just stroking lube onto his cock is enough to make his breath hitch. As he positions himself behind Ian, Michael's eyes are heavy-lidded, and he's breathing hard already, but evidently he's still focused enough to push into Ian.

"Oh…*God.*" Ian moans, closing his eyes and gripping the footboard. He rocks back, driving Michael deeper. They're breathing almost in unison now, and their bodies are falling into synch like they've done this a million times before.

My mouth waters. Apparently there is something hotter than watching them make out in a hot tub. Jesus Christ.

"Josh." Ian beckons to me, and then taps the footboard in front of him. I quickly get up off the bed and come around in front of him. As soon as I'm within reach, he grabs my arm, pulls me closer. Before I know what's happening, my cock is between his lips. I grab the footboard and Ian's hair for balance. I've experienced his mouth countless times before, but all my senses are heightened tonight, and every touch sends lightning bolts through my veins.

Over Ian, I meet Michael's eyes. I can't tell if his skin is still damp from the hot tub, or if he's sweating now, but either way, the sheen just adds to that primal gleam in his eyes. When he licks his lips, I can't help shuddering, and inadvertently push my cock deeper into Ian's mouth. He groans, though, and he starts teasing my balls with his fingers as he deep throats me.

"Shit," I breathe. "That is so…" Words. Fuck words. Fuck thoughts. Ian's sucking my cock and Michael's fucking Ian right in front of me, and I don't know or care how to articulate anything beyond a long, helpless moan.

The harder Michael fucks Ian, the more enthusiastically Ian sucks my cock. The more I curse and gasp, the harder Michael fucks Ian. I have just enough presence of mind to hope they're both as overwhelmed with pleasure as I am, that they're both as close to the edge. My eyes don't want to focus, but I force them to, and it's worth it—Michael's definitely getting close to the edge, and the sight is unbelievable. His eyes screwed shut. His lips apart. Sharp, uneven breaths. Hard, frantic thrusts. Every muscle is tense, his knuckles blanched as he holds on to my husband's hips, his skin shining with sweat. And God, I can feel his thrusts—every time he slams into Ian, Ian jerks forward, his lips and hand tightening around my cock like an echo of Michael fucking him.

And then Michael forces himself in as deep as Ian will take him.

Ian moans, the sound reverberating through me as Michael throws his head back and releases a choked half cry, half whimper, and shudders. Ian doesn't let up, and between his mouth and the sight of Michael coming undone, I lose it. I grab onto the footboard for balance as the world shifts beneath my feet and everything goes white for a moment. Ian keeps stroking me and teasing me with his tongue, drawing my orgasm out until my legs nearly drop out from under me.

Ian stops. I blink a few times. Michael's dropped back onto his heels, breathing hard and also blinking like he can't quite focus. Ian's grinning up at me as he licks his lips.

"Oh my God," I moan.

"Yeah." Michael exhales. "That. But we still…" He puts a hand on Ian's hip. "Still gotta make you come."

"I don't think that'll be difficult." Ian gets up on his knees, and he reaches for me, but Michael puts an arm around him and pulls him back. Ian turns his head, and as soon as they kiss, I swear an aftershock of my orgasm almost puts me on my knees. Michael's out of breath, but that doesn't stop him from kissing Ian deeply, just the way he does after I've sucked him off.

Ian grips the back of Michael's head with one hand, and strokes himself with the other. Oh yeah. We definitely need to get that man off.

"Put him on his back," I say. "I think he deserves one hell of an orgasm."

Michael breaks the kiss. "I think you're right." While they shift position, I come around the bed and join them, and Ian's shoulders have barely hit the bed before my mouth is around his cock.

"Oh yeah," he groans. "*Fuck*."

I nudge his thigh, and he parts his legs for me. When I slip two fingers inside his ass, he grips my hair. He moans, but it's a muffled sound, and I glance up to see Michael kissing him deeply, and the two of them make out as I suck Ian's cock and fuck him with my hand. Ian's already close to the brink when I start; I'm tempted to stop, let him calm down completely, and then give him the kind of long blowjob he loves, but that would be cruel at this point, so I don't hold back.

In almost no time, he's nearly there. His cock gets thicker, harder, and he curses and gasps as he tries to thrust into my mouth. I crook my fingers, and—

"*Fuck!*" He nearly comes up off the bed as semen jets across my tongue. "Oh my—" He's muted again, his cries reduced to barely audible moans by Michael's mouth, and between us, we keep him coming until he breaks the kiss to whisper, "S-stop…please…"

I swallow as I carefully withdraw my fingers.

Ian sinks back down to the mattress. He covers his eyes for a moment, just catching his breath. “Wow.”

“I agree.” Michael nuzzles his neck. “You two are fucking *hot* in bed.”

I chuckle as I come up to join them. “You say this like it’s a surprise.”

“Oh, it’s not.” He grins at me over my panting, trembling husband. “But you’ve gotta admit—experiencing is believing.”

“Good point.”

Ian lowers his hand. “Don’t know. Might have to do it again. Just to be sure.”

“You want to catch your breath first?”

He nods vigorously. “Yes. Please.”

Once Ian can stand, we all get up to clean ourselves off, and then collapse on the bed again, Ian and me on either side of Michael. We’re all still lethargic and relaxed, but I feel more coherent now. Michael’s eyes are clearer. Ian has returned to planet Earth. None of us are quick to fall asleep after sex, so as the dust settles, we’re all wide awake. Just relaxed. Really relaxed.

Michael glances back and forth between us. “So I guess this means I’m good with other guys. Not that Ian’s a stranger, but…”

“I know what you mean,” Ian says. “I’m new to you. In this sense, anyway.”

Michael nods. To me, he says, “You were right. This was a good idea.”

Ian arches an eyebrow. “Oh, so this was *your* idea?”

“Are you surprised?” I ask.

“Hmm. Well. Now that you mention it…”

“That’s what I thought.” I smooth Michael’s hair. “You did still get nervous. Maybe this is something we should keep doing. Just until those nerves settle.”

“So, all three of us?” Ian asks.

I nod. “Or the two of you. Whichever works.”

Michael runs his fingers along Ian’s arm. “Well, I’m definitely not opposed to one-on-one with either of you. But both together?” He grins. “I’m not going to say no to that either.”

Ian laughs. “Yeah. What he said.”

They both turn to me. I show my palms. “Hey, don’t look at me for the voice of reason. I’ve been fantasizing about the two of you at once for ten years.”

“Oh, *have* you now?” Ian asks.

“Are you really surprised?”

His lips quirk. “Actually, no. And I may have thought about it once or twice myself.”

“Uh-huh.” Michael raises an eyebrow. “Is this why you guys kept inviting me over to hang out in the hot tub?”

Ian and I both laugh and shake our heads.

“No, of course not.” I shrug. “But, I mean, it didn’t *hurt*…”

Michael snorts, rolling his eyes. “Guess I should’ve brought over some stronger wine.”

Ian wrinkles his nose. “Assuming it didn’t taste like the horse piss you brought last time.”

Shaking a finger at him, Michael says, “Shiraz. Christmas. Your argument is invalid.”

We all laugh again, and they nudge each other playfully.

As the moment passes, Ian turns to Michael again. “In all seriousness, this arrangement”—he gestures at all three of us —“obviously works. And if this helps exorcise some of that jerkoff’s demons, then I’m definitely in.”

“Thank you,” Michael whispers, caressing Ian’s face.

Ian kisses his wrist. “You’re welcome to stay here tonight if you want.” He meets my eyes and his eyebrows flick up. *Right?*

I nod. “Definitely.”

Michael smiles but shakes his head. “I can’t leave Cody for the night, or I definitely would.”

“Completely understandable.” Ian turns Michael’s head toward him and gives him a tender kiss. “Why don’t you bring him next time? Ariel wouldn’t mind some company.”

Michael laughs. “Well, Cody hasn’t had a playdate in a while.”

I chuckle. “Guess that means he gets one, and so do you.”

“Perfect.”

“Yes, it is.” Ian kisses Michael again. “The dogs will be entertained, and we can have you all night.”

Michael just shivers.

So do I.

Chapter Sixteen

Michael isn't just comfortable with Ian as well as with me—the three of us can't get enough of each other. I can't even say for sure if it's in the name of helping Michael anymore, or if we've just turned something loose that doesn't want to be contained again. Our hot tub nights take on a whole new dimension. And Michael's at our house—and in our bed—more evenings than not. I don't think Ian's ever been so insatiable, not even back when we were both bathhouse sluts, and Michael's in heaven.

We aren't even having sex all the time. Dinner. Movies. Trips to the dog park with Ariel and Cody. But even when we're clothed and out in public, that undercurrent remains. Subtle touches. Less than subtle looks. We've spent time with Michael for years, and we're doing a lot of the things we've done all that time, but it's never been quite like this. As if there's always an unspoken *Just wait until we get home*.

The evenings when we don't go out are almost comically routine. Ian gets home first. Michael usually shows up around seven. I get there shortly after that. There's small talk in the kitchen, maybe a bottle of wine if anyone wants it, and someone finally makes a move. A flirtatious comment here. A playful ass grab there. Then we're off and running until Michael has to drag himself out to his car and head home. Unless, of course, he stays over—I love those nights. Falling asleep naked between Michael and Ian is becoming such a comfortable, sexy part of our routine, it's starting to feel strange when he's not here. Rosie's even getting used to the idea of an extra dog hanging around.

So when I get home from work this evening, my whole body gets warmer at the sight of Michael's car in the driveway and Cody playing in the backyard with Ariel. As I pull into the garage beside Ian's car, my pulse shoots skyward as if this is the first time. The novelty definitely hasn't worn off.

I can't help grinning as I get out of the car.

I step into the foyer, and—

Stop dead.

Oh my God.

I've seen a lot of incredibly hot things in my life, especially recently, but all that pales in comparison to what's playing out right now—my husband kneeling in front of the couch, head bobbing over my best friend's lap.

Michael's been resistant to oral since the first night. They've tried a few times, but he's shied away, and Ian never, ever pushes.

And now…

This?

Neither of them responds to my presence. Maybe they don't hear me. Maybe they're too caught up in the moment. Knowing how talented Ian's mouth is, I wouldn't be surprised if Michael's forgotten his own name by now. His fingers rake through Ian's dark hair, and his eyes are closed and his teeth are digging into his lower lip, and my cock is getting hard before I've even toed the door shut.

I set my jacket down and loosen my tie. My legs don't quite remember how to work, but somehow, I convince them to carry me across the foyer and into the living room. And from the doorway, I just stare.

Michael exhales slowly, running his fingers through Ian's hair. It's impossible to tell what Ian's doing—deep-throating, licking his way up and down the shaft, focusing on the sensitive head—only that Michael loves it. If the two of them had to banish any demons before they got this far, it doesn't show.

"Oh, shit, that's good." Michael's head lolls to the side. His back arches as his fingers twitch in Ian's hair.

I ease myself onto the couch beside Michael, and his eyes slide open. He reaches for me, draws me in—I swear to God, if I wasn't hard already, his mouth would have changed that in an instant. His kiss sends shivers all the way through me, curling my toes inside my shoes.

Between kisses, I murmur, "I hope you're not gonna come quite yet." I'm surprised I get the words out at all, never mind audibly.

"If he keeps…" Michael looks down and sweeps his tongue across his lips. "If he keeps doing this…"

Ian's eyes flick up. My body temperature soars.

"Maybe he should." I hook a finger under Michael's chin and turn him back toward me. "Then we'll just have to make you come again later."

Michael whimpers, and I silence him with a kiss. He wriggles against me and slides his hand over my lap, and now it's my turn to squirm.

In front of us, Ian moans softly. I look down, and he's picked up speed, taking Michael deeper in his mouth and adding a little twist with his hand, and Michael's palm presses harder against my cock.

I nibble Michael's earlobe. "Don't hold back. This isn't going to be the last time you come tonight."

He presses the heel of his hand against my dick and kneads my balls with his fingers—not enough to hurt but damn sure enough to make my breath catch. His head falls back against the couch, and I kiss his exposed throat, my cock getting even harder beneath his hand

as my lips explore that hot, smooth flesh.

"B-both of you. Don't stop. Please…"

We're not stopping for anything. Michael's breathing so fast now, and when I slide my hand over his chest, his heart is pounding. His sharp huffs of breath turn to whispered curses. He squeezes my cock, the touch bordering on painful and turning me on like crazy, and I murmur "*fuck*" against his neck.

He inhales. Holds it. His fingers twitch. His heart pounds.

And then he releases a ragged breath and shudders hard, fucking into Ian's mouth as much as he can in this position, and if I know Ian, he's on the verge of coming himself as Michael lets go.

"Jesus Christ." With one last shudder, Michael sinks back against the couch. He covers his face with a shaking hand, and Ian and I exchange grins as Michael trembles between us.

"We should really go upstairs." I gently remove Michael's other hand from my groin so I can think. "Much more room up there."

"Good idea," Michael murmurs.

"Agreed." Ian gingerly stands, cursing under his breath as his knees and ankles pop. As he does, Michael gazes longingly at the thick bulge beneath Ian's jeans, and I know that look—he wants to blow Ian. He made it past one barrier tonight, and now he can handle Ian going down on him, and I can see in his eyes how badly he wants to return the favor.

But he doesn't. That's one line he just hasn't been able to cross yet. Not even with me.

My stomach tightens. Night after night, the three of us fuck like rabbits, Michael getting more and more confident with every touch, and *still* Steve manages to keep a chokehold on him.

We'll get there. I refuse to believe we won't.

And for now, there are plenty of other ways to keep Michael's mouth entertained.

I gently turn his head toward me, grin and pull him into a kiss.

~*~

Afterward, the three of us lie beneath the sheets, Michael in the middle again. Ian gets up to let the dogs in—though they stay downstairs—and joins us again, draping an arm over Michael and propping himself up on his elbow, facing us both.

"Are they tired out?" Michael asks.

"Pretty sure they'll sleep well tonight." Ian kisses him. "Pretty sure *you'll* sleep well tonight."

"Kind of hard not to after you guys are done with me."

I chuckle and kiss the top of his shoulder. "I don't think there'll be

any insomnia in this house any time soon."

"Definitely not," Ian says.

I watch them both for a moment. "So, I see you two have gotten comfortable with each other."

"We already were," Michael says.

"But enough for oral?"

Michael nods as he runs his fingers along Ian's arm. "I think it was a foregone conclusion that it would happen eventually."

I smile. "That's probably the most optimistic thing you've said since we started out."

He smiles too. "I guess you guys are fucking the cynic right out of me." He and Ian exchange grins, and Michael shrugs. "Tonight, I decided I was tired of getting so hung up on oral. Because I *know* I love it—I just had to get past that mental barrier. We started kissing before you got home, and—"

"That was fucking hot," Ian whispers. "One minute, we're kissing on the couch. The next, he's asking if the offer is still open to suck his dick." He shivers, running a hand over Michael's hip. "Damn right it was."

"Yeah, it was." Michael lifts his head and kisses Ian lightly. "Thank you, by the way. It seems like such a stupid thing to get hung up—"

"You don't have to justify any of this, Michael." Ian rests his hand in the middle of Michael's chest. "You've been through hell. Getting past that is a process."

"Still." Michael swallows. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Ian kisses him, then turns to me. "You're, um, not upset, are you? About us starting without you tonight?"

"No, definitely not." I shake my head. "I was just thinking." I study them both. "Out of curiosity, when you guys started fooling around tonight, would it…" I hesitate. "Would it have been different if I hadn't been on my way?"

They exchange puzzled glances.

"How so?" Michael asks.

"I mean, do you think you'd be completely comfortable one-on-one with Ian?"

Ian's eyebrows jump.

Michael's eyes lose focus. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Josh does have a point," Ian says. "Whenever you and I have been together, Josh has been here, or he's been well on his way. We didn't even get started tonight until, what, ten minutes before he got home?" He trails the backs of his fingers up Michael's arm. "If you want to see what it's like without him as a safety net, then—"

"I don't see how I'd freak out with you, though." Michael smiles.

“I know you. I trust you.”

“Exactly,” I say. “So it makes perfect sense. If some nerves or past trauma come out at an inopportune moment, you’ll be in good hands. I know it’s kind of baby steps, but that’s probably the best thing, you know?” I search Michael’s eyes. “Only if you want to, though. Of course.”

“I do.” Michael chews his lip. “But you guys have already gone above and beyond for me. I don’t this to turn into something that’ll cause problems between you two.”

“It won’t.” Ian squeezes his arm. “If there was a problem, none of us would be here in the first place.”

Michael’s eyebrows pull together. “So…”

“If you’re game to try,” Ian puts a hand over Michael’s. “There’s one way to find out if you’re comfortable with just me.” To me, he says, “If you’re really okay with it.”

“Yeah, of course.”

We both turn to Michael, and he shrinks back slightly, as if the double scrutiny is more than he can handle.

I slide my hand under his and Ian’s. “It’s up to you. If you’d rather keep to all three of us…”

“No, I trust Ian. There is.” Michael glances at me, then turns to Ian. “Meet me at my apartment tomorrow night? After work?”

“Let’s do this.” Ian grins, and I hope to God Michael feels the same tingle of anticipation I do.

After a moment, he returns Ian’s grin. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter Seventeen

Tonight's the night.

Ian isn't home when I get there. His car is gone. The dog is whining and bouncing, eager for attention. The laptop on the table is closed, all the papers tucked away in an attaché case. Rosie is peering at me as if it's my fault that Ian isn't here, and how *dare* I come home without him?

"Sorry, sweetie." I scratch her ears but stop before she swats me. "He'll be home later."

How much later? I stop in my tracks. My visits with Michael haven't been overnight, but no one explicitly decided whether this one would be. Do I wait up?

I shake my head and head into the kitchen to make myself something to eat. This is hardly the first time I've come home to an empty house, and I can handle it. I always have.

But his absence is painfully conspicuous tonight.

This is a good thing, I remind myself. Michael's comfortable enough with Ian to be alone with him. I trust Ian—Michael's in good hands, and Ian will come home to me. If not tonight, then tomorrow.

Now if I could convince my brain to stop panicking over it and turning it into something it's not, I'd be in good shape. Ian isn't having an affair any more than I was. Michael isn't going to wind up traumatized all over again because Ian won't let that happen. Ian will come home at the end of the night, and everything will continue as normal. Well, some shade of normal, anyway.

Thinking about it isn't going to accomplish anything, so I do the best I can to distract myself.

After a quick dinner, I take Ariel out into the yard. Immediately, she grabs a stick and runs up to me, tail wagging so hard she's whipping herself in the sides. I'm glad she doesn't have her tail docked like most boxers, but damn, that's gotta hurt. When I toss the stick, she turns, and her tail cracks me in the knee.

"Shit, dog," I mutter, eyes watering as she takes off to get the stick.

She brings the stick back and drops it, and since I'm still leaning over to rub my knee, she slurps me in the face for good measure. Laughing, I gently nudge her away and toss the stick again. The pain fades, of course. I can't even be mad at her—hell, I'm impressed. That tail's a damned weapon.

I throw the stick a couple dozen times, but my arm's getting tired well before my dog is.

"You need someone who can throw it farther," I tell her as I put the stick in the box where all her outdoor toys end up. "Michael's a pitcher—ask him when he comes over."

Michael.

Fuck.

So much for distracting myself.

I take Ariel back inside and do a double take.

"Rosie." I snap my fingers. "Get off the counter."

She glares at me, as if to say *Make me, asshole*.

I roll my eyes and reach for her. She lifts her paw, daring me to actually pick her up.

"Really?" I return the glare. "You never get up there when Dad's home. What the hell."

The paw stays up, her blue eyes narrow and her ears start to go down. All Ian would have to do right now is give her a look, and she'd jump down without a fuss. Then again, she wouldn't have gotten up there if he were here, so it would've been a moot point.

"Down." I put my arm over her and scoop her off the counter. Naturally, she bites me—not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to let me know she is displeased. When I set her on the floor, she hisses.

"Sorry, kiddo. Dad's not here. You're stuck with me and Ariel tonight."

Her ears go all the way down, and I wonder if she actually understood me or if it's just her usual disdain. Either way, she didn't authorize Ian's absence this evening, and if I know what's good for me, I'll conjure him from thin air to do her bidding.

Then she turns away and saunters out of the room. She'll probably go terrorize Ariel now, but at least she doesn't use her claws on the poor dog.

Alone in the kitchen, I drum my fingers on the counter where the cat was defiantly sitting a moment ago. Between the two guys, I haven't had much time to myself in ages. Really, not since Michael and I started sleeping together. And now, I probably have a few hours. Knowing Ian and Michael, they'll fill any downtime with talk about baseball or football, so I don't expect him home any time soon.

So now I just…need to figure out…what to do…

I blow out a breath in the silent kitchen. Is this how Ian feels every time I'm alone with Michael? If it bothered him, he'd have said something, but it's weird to be in his shoes this evening.

A few chores around the house keep me busy for a while. Dishes. Some routine cleaning and tidying upstairs. Sorting a month's worth of junk mail. Litter boxes. Topping off water dispensers for both animals. Ian and I keep the place pretty neat, though, and our animals

are relatively low maintenance, so there's only so much to do unless I want to start pressure-washing the driveway or something.

It does kill some time, though. Once I'm done, I park on the couch to catch up on some Walking Dead. Can't exactly watch that with Ian around. Ariel jumps up beside me, flops down and rests her head on my leg. Rosie sits on the back of the armchair, peering down at us.

For the next couple of hours, I lose myself in watching a bunch of allegedly intelligent people routinely paint themselves into corners and fall victim to zombies. Ian's probably right that it's a stupid show, and I can't get through an episode without at least one facepalm and a muttered "Are you kidding me?", but it's entertaining as hell. And Daryl's hot, which makes up for pretty much everything.

Halfway through the sixth episode of the evening, my phone vibrates. A million imaginary texts flood my mind, and for the two seconds it takes me to get the phone from the coffee table and look at the screen, I'm suddenly and irrationally convinced that every possible worst case scenario is taking place.

But Ian's name comes up, followed by: *On my way home*.

All the worry vanishes in favor of the fluttery, giddy feeling I used to get when we were dating. When he'd text me to let me know he was heading over to my apartment, and I'd start counting down the minutes until he was there. Because I knew exactly how long it took for him to get from his place to mine, just like I know down to the nanosecond how long it takes to get here from Michael's.

Maybe I left a chore or two undone. There's got to be something I can do for the next forty-seven minutes.

I look at the TV screen. This episode is halfway over, but that'll kill at least some of the time. Hmm.

I click off the DVR to see what's on TV. After flipping through a few channels, I land on a baseball game. It's in the fourth inning, so he'll be home long before it's over. And at least it isn't football. I kind of know what's going on.

But holy shit, boring. Forget it.

I turn off the TV completely and start playing games on my phone instead. Just as I hoped, they hold my attention, and before I know it, Ariel's head snaps up, making her tags jingle. A second later, the garage door rumbles to life, and Ariel is off the couch, bounding toward the door.

It's just as well she has no dignity and does the running, jumping and barking. At this point, it's either her or me.

Christ, what the fuck is wrong with me? He's been gone a few hours.

Having sex with another man.

Having sex with Michael.

Just like I've been doing for weeks.

Then Ian steps into the foyer. Ariel goes crazy—*I know the feeling, sweetheart*—so he crouches down to pet her and at least try not to get whipped in the face by that tail. Meanwhile, I sit up but don't stand yet. Can't look too eager, right?

Get a grip, idiot.

On the armchair, Rosie stretches and yawns, looking as indifferent as possible, then sits up and stares at Ian expectantly. When he's done greeting the dog, he stands, and on his way to the couch, stops to pet her, and she bumps her head against his arm, purring loudly.

I shoot him my most pitiful expression. "So I'm third in line?"

"Hardly." He rolls his eyes, sits beside me and puts an arm around my waist. "But I have to appease them so that when I say hello to you…" He draws me in for a kiss, and it's one of those deep, languid kisses that turns my brain to mush. When our lips separate, he finishes: "…we don't get interrupted."

"G-good point."

"So." He winks. "Hello."

We both laugh, and he kisses me again, briefly this time.

"So, um." I clear my throat. "How was he? I mean, how was it? The night. With Michael."

Ian chuckles and touches my cheek. "You're adorable when you're flustered, you know that?"

"Flustered. I'm—"

"Yes, you are." He kisses the tip of my nose. "And to answer your question, everything went fine."

"It went fine?" I fold my hands in my lap because I can't remember how to look casual. "It wasn't a surgical procedure, Ian."

He laughs nervously. "What do you want me to say? I had a great time, and I'm pretty sure Michael did too. There isn't much more to tell."

"You enjoyed yourselves, though, right?"

Color blooms in his cheeks, and he can't quite look me in the eye. "We had a good time."

"Ian?" I tip up his chin. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah." He kisses my hand, and this time he does meet my gaze. "I guess it's just a little weird coming home from another guy's bed. Even his."

"Tell me about it."

He's about to say something, but Rosie picks that moment to stomp across me and flop down in Ian's lap.

I chuckle. "Somebody missed you tonight."

He scratches her tummy. "How badly did she terrorize you?"

"She only bit me once."

"She bit you?" He eyes me. "What did you do?"

"Told her she couldn't sit on the kitchen counter."

"What?" He wags his finger at her. "What have I told you, kitty?"

She swats at his finger but keeps her claws in. Of course.

He laughs, then picks her up and deposits her on the other cushion. When he faces me again, the humor is gone. "So, tonight." He swallows. "There *was* one point where Michael started to freak out."

My blood turns cold and my spine straightens. "What happened?"

He loses focus for a second. Slowly, he shakes his head and meets my gaze again. "I'm not even really sure, to be honest. Everything seemed fine, and then…"

"And then it wasn't?"

"Basically."

Sighing, I nod. "Yeah, I've had that happen many times. But, he was okay afterward?"

Ian nods. "We stopped for a little while. He calmed down, and then we got started again."

"What set him off? I mean, what were you guys doing when it happened?"

Ian swallows. "Missionary. Or, trying to, anyway."

"You on top? Or him?"

"Me." He chews his lip. "When we tried again, he wanted to do the same position again, so we just took it slower."

"He does like that position," I say quietly. "We've done it quite a few times."

"Why would it set him off this time?"

"It's hard to say. That fucking PTSD can just come out of nowhere."

Ian's lips twist. "Now I get why you called it a minefield."

"Uh-huh. He's come a long way, though. It's amazing to see the difference in him. How he was so nervous and self-conscious early on, but now…"

Ian shivers.

So do I.

"It's a damned shame he was ever like that," Ian says. "I swear, if I ever see Steve again…"

"You and me both. And I'm going to be chewing my nails to stumps the first time Michael's out with another guy."

Ian nods. "Me too."

"Well. We'll all cross that bridge when we get there."

"Yeah. For now…" Ian takes my hand. "Bed?"

"Bed."

We go through our evening routine, cat and dog underfoot as always. I can't quite settle down for the night, though. I'm relieved to

have him home, even though I don't know why—I knew he'd be home, and I knew where he was the whole time anyway. But I'm also restless. Maybe because I know there's not a chance in hell that we're having sex tonight. We always want what we can't have, after all.

Once we're in bed, Ian doesn't kill the light. He tugs on my shoulder, so I roll onto my back. He's on his side, arm draped across my chest. "You all right tonight?"

"Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. You just seem a bit tense."

I chew the inside of my cheek. "I guess it was just a bit weird, switching roles with you." Meeting his eyes, I ask, "Has it been weird for you? When I'm over at Michael's place?"

"It was a little in the beginning. Just an adjustment, I guess."

"Maybe that's it."

"We've been strictly monogamous for a long time. Shifting gears and accepting the idea of your husband sleeping with another guy… It's gonna make you stop and think, you know?"

"Yeah. It does." I touch his face. "I'm sorry if this has been stressful for you."

"Don't be." He turns his head and kisses my palm. "The only one who needs to apologize for anything is Steve, and he's beyond redemption anyway. The adjustments and stress for us have been worth it to help Michael."

"I agree. As long as we're okay."

Ian smiles, sending a warm jolt of electricity through me. "We're definitely okay." His fingertips drift over my abs and continue downward.

I bite my lip. "I thought you were tired."

"I am." He kisses the side of my neck, and then starts downward again, his lips following the same path his fingers took. "But you're not."

"No, but—"

But I love those soft little kisses down my chest. Over my stomach. Across my hipbone. And Ian may be completely spent after everything he did with Michael tonight, but when he closes his lips around my cock, the fatigue doesn't show at all.

And I just lie back, close my eyes and enjoy my husband's skilled, enthusiastic mouth.

Chapter Eighteen

After that, Michael and Ian spend the occasional night together, and Michael and I sometimes have a bed to ourselves. More often than not, it's all three of us, but it seems they're as addictive as they are addicted—we all want each other all the time. Some nights, I all but forget this is meant to help Michael repair damage from his past—he's on an even keel most of the time, with only the slightest pauses now and then, and his avoidance of giving blowjobs. The line blurred a long time ago between doing this for fun and doing it for therapy.

Which I suppose is good. The less it's at the forefront of my mind—and hopefully Michael's—the less it's a problem. The farther his demons are behind him. The more that jackass's memory fades.

So I should feel good about all of this. And I do.

But something isn't sitting right. It festers beneath my ribs for a few days, getting steadily more noticeable. I can't quite put my finger on what's causing it, though, only that I always feel worse after a night with Michael. What the hell is wrong? Because everything seems to be going just fine. Right?

It makes sense one morning when I roll over and find Ian's side of the bed empty. That in itself isn't unusual, and I know he's here because the shower is running. The cat is still on Ian's pillow, the dog slowly taking over his side—everything is normal.

But his absence in our bed resonates with me in a weird way. I've gotten used to him occasionally being at Michael's, so why should this—

Ah. That's it.

He's here, but…not. And it's been like that a lot recently. Almost constantly, if I'm honest. My stomach clenches—I can't even remember the last time we slept together. We've had a few quickies before going to bed, especially if one of us has been out with Michael, but beyond that…

Nothing.

As I lie there, my thoughts unnerve me. I fully expected to be engrossed in helping Michael, and I knew there'd be some physical exhaustion involved. But it hadn't occurred to me that Ian and I might neglect our marriage in the process. That we might get so caught up in Michael, we'd forget how much we enjoyed being together. Even after more than a decade, our sex life has always been amazing, but lately…

Lately it's been nearly nonexistent outside of the things we've done with Michael. When we have had sex on our own, it's been a

reprieve—a chance to enjoy some effortless physical intimacy after seeing firsthand how hard it is for Michael. That's not how it's supposed to be. That's not how I imagined it could ever be.

What the hell is happening to us?

We're getting too tangled up with Michael, that's what.

Fuck. Didn't I swear up and down this wouldn't happen again? That everything with Michael would not distract me from Ian? I don't want to leave Michael to his own devices until he's sure he's back on track, but I need to fix this. And it can't wait.

I carefully slip my leg out from under the dog. She grumbles a bit, wriggles farther onto Ian's side, but that's it.

I step into the bathroom. The sight of Ian on the other side of the frosted glass makes my chest tighten. How long *has* it been?

He turns his head, though the semi-opaque door obscures his features. "You're up early."

"Yeah. I know." I pause. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sure."

I step into the shower with him.

"Couldn't sleep?" He leans back to rinse some shampoo from his hair.

"Not really." I wait until he's done rinsing off, and then put my hands on his waist. "I wanted to see you before you go to work."

He glances down at my hands and blinks a few times. "What are __"

"We haven't been spending enough time together." I draw him in and run my fingers through his wet hair. It's too early in the morning to kiss, but I need to touch him. "We were having so much sex before, and now that we're with Michael all the time, we've barely had anything left for each other."

Ian frowns. "I know. And I want to keep spending time with him, but…" He swallows. "To be honest, I miss you."

"I miss you too," I whisper.

"Call Michael when he's up." He kisses my fingers. "Tonight, we're shutting off our phones and staying home."

"Good idea. I'm sure he'll understand."

"I have no doubt."

We exchange smiles.

"You know, as long as I'm in here." I snake a hand between us.

Ian sucks in a breath. "Josh, I need to… I have to get to…"

I trail my fingers along his cock. "You have time, don't you?"

He shudders, pressing against my hand. "I need—"

"Turn around."

He hesitates, and I'm expecting him to insist he really doesn't have time, but then he does turn around. I pull him against me so I can

reach around and stroke his cock while I kiss up and down his neck.

Ian braces his arm against the wall, and he pushes back, and a groan escapes my lips as he rubs against my dick. I had only intended to jerk him off and give him a little preview of tonight, but like this, with my cock pressed between his wet skin and mine, I'm losing it too.

His other hand closes around mine. He's not taking over, not controlling how I stroke his cock, just making contact, and I stroke him faster. Ian moans and thrusts into my hand—our hands—which only increases the delicious friction against my cock. I bury my face in his neck and rub harder against his wet skin.

"*God.*" He shudders, and I hold him tighter as my own orgasm rocks my whole damn body. So much for just getting him off, but I'm not complaining.

We rinse off and then pull each other close, and for the longest time, we just stand there, holding each other beneath the warm shower, lazily kissing each other's necks. Fatigue—from both my orgasm and being up at the break of dawn—sets in, and I'm getting sleepy in his arms, but I don't care.

"Why did we *ever* stop fucking in the morning?" he says.

I kiss his forehead. "Because you went and got a job that makes you get up too fucking early."

"Oh right." We both laugh breathlessly.

"Tonight's a good idea," Ian murmurs. "I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

"Gotta go to work, though." He lifts his head and meets my gaze, his eyelids heavy and his lips curving into the most delicious grin. "I'll be counting down the hours."

"Me too." I smile sleepily. "Love you."

"Love you too." Ian kisses my cheek, then steps out of the shower.

With the stall to myself, I close my eyes and let the hot water rush over my skin for a minute or so. Then I reach for the shampoo and start getting myself cleaned up. It's early, but now that I'm awake, I might as well get ready for work.

Not that I'll get much done today. I suspect I'll be a distracted idiot for the next several hours.

Because tonight, I have a date with my husband.

~*~

As I pull in the driveway after work, anticipation crackles along my spine—Ian's always home first, so I have no doubt he's ready and waiting for me. In bed? On the couch? Hell, he could be in the garage, ready to fuck me across the hood or in the backseat.

I shiver. I don't care where or how, I just want him.

In the house, Ariel greets me as she always does, but Ian doesn't answer when I call for him. I take off my jacket in the foyer, and on my way into the kitchen, slip off my tie.

And there, beside his laptop and briefcase on the kitchen table, is a bottle of wine, a pair of glasses and a piece of paper with two handwritten words:

Hot tub.

Oh, hell yes.

Glasses in one hand, bottle in the other, I step out onto the deck, and there he is. He's lounging in the tub, arms stretched out across the edge, watching me.

I hold up the bottle. "Should we even bother with the wine?"

"Maybe afterward." He beckons to me. "Get in here."

Neighbors be damned, I strip out of my clothes and slip into the water. My feet have barely touched the bottom before Ian wraps his arms around me and pulls me onto his lap. His wet hands run all over my back and shoulders, up and down my sides and my thighs.

Under the water, his erection brushes mine, but it's his mouth that has my attention right now. I've always loved the way he kisses.

After a while, Ian breaks the kiss and gazes up at me. Sliding wet fingers through my hair, he says, "I don't want to hurry. We have all night, and I want to use it."

"Agreed. Question is, what do you want to do with it?"

He flashes a wicked grin. "I think what we're doing now is perfect."

"Me too."

We haven't made out like this in *years*. This is exactly the way he kissed me the night we met, when we'd caught each other's eye in a bathhouse and found ourselves pressed up against a wall, kissing and panting before we'd exchanged so much as a hello. Memories rush through my mind of where that first kiss went—a frantic hand job in a corner, a blowjob in front of guys whose names I'll never know—and I shiver against him.

At some point, we pull apart, and our eyes meet.

My spine tingles.

He licks his lips. "Bedroom?"

"Bedroom."

We dry off just enough to keep from slipping and falling on the linoleum, and somehow Ian's coherent enough to bring the untouched wine bottle back in the house.

Then it's up to the bedroom.

I lie back against the pillows, and Ian goes right for my cock. True to his word, though, he's in no hurry—he licks and teases me, as if he wants to savor every taste. No one on the planet can make a blowjob

last as long as Ian can without it getting boring and tedious—and a blowjob from him is *never* boring or tedious.

After just a few minutes, though, he stops. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mmhmm.” He gestures for me to sit up. I do, and then let him guide me back down so we’re lying in opposite directions, facing each other on our sides. Oh yes. This will do quite nicely—now I can suck his cock while he sucks mine.

The only downside is that it’s difficult to concentrate while he’s driving me crazy with his mouth, but I try anyway. Ian moans softly, and his hips start moving, not quite thrusting into my mouth, but definitely trying to get deeper. I do the same, and we fall into a slow, steady rhythm, sliding in and out of each other’s mouths. Our hands roam over each other’s asses, hips, legs. No one’s in any hurry—I could lie like this and please him like this all night long. Lips, tongue, hands, doing to him the same things he’s doing to me and vice versa. Time doesn’t exist anymore. Nothing does except this beautiful man beside me and all the little moans we’re drawing out of each other.

After God knows how long, Ian stops. “Come up here.” He turns onto his back, and I join him, climbing on top. His hands on my hips nudge me into motion, and silently, breathlessly, we’re moving together, my cock rubbing against his. The friction is insane, but quickly becomes too intense, so I get the lube off the nightstand.

I pour some into Ian’s hand. He strokes some of it onto his cock and some onto mine. As we start moving together again, the undersides of our dicks rubbing together, that slipperiness is mind-blowing.

His other hand curves around the back of my neck, and as he draws me down, he lifts his head to meet me halfway. As soon as our lips meet, I’m nearly there—his body, his mouth, everything about him turns me on, and I can barely stand it as we kiss and rub together.

Ian breaks the kiss, but he doesn’t let me go. Forehead to forehead, panting and trembling, we’re both getting close—I swear I can feel his orgasm building just like I can feel my own.

Then he gasps. A shudder runs up his back, lifting him off the bed, and I kiss his neck as semen spurts between us, and in seconds, I’m coming too, groaning and shaking until I can’t even fucking move anymore.

He collapses. I collapse. We hold onto each other, we breathe, and I’m surprised I don’t black out.

When my arms and legs finally agree to hold me up, we separate, we wipe ourselves off and then pull the sheets up over us.

Neither of us says anything for a while. Lying beside him, head tucked beneath his chin, I don’t want to get up. Even now that we’ve

reconnected again, I'm almost afraid to let him go. This is the second time I've let our arrangement with Michael pull my focus away from my marriage, and it's left me rattled that we both let it happen this time.

Ian's hand slides up my arm. "Still awake?"

"Yeah." I rub my eyes. "Just"—*distracted*—"drowsy."

"Me too." He holds me closer. "We really need to do this more often."

"Yeah, we do." I kiss beneath his jaw.

"I don't want to stop what we're doing with Michael," he says. "But we can't forget about us."

I close my eyes and exhale, relieved we're on the same page even though I shouldn't be at all surprised. "No, we definitely can't. Maybe we need a night or two a week that's just for us."

"Probably. Or even keep playing it by ear, but make sure we're still spending time one on one. I have no doubt Michael will understand."

"More than most guys would, I think." He nudges me gently. "We should eat something."

"Yeah." I drape my arm over him and cuddle closer. "But I don't want to move yet."

"Neither do I." He nuzzles my hair. "This is comfortable."

"Mmhmm."

"Come on. Let's go make some dinner before we fall asleep."

I want nothing more than to lie here with him, but I nod and start to get up. "Yeah, good idea."

Ian stops me with a hand on the back of my neck, and he grins. "Maybe a light dinner. I don't know about you, but I could go for some more tonight."

Goose bumps spring up along my spine. "You can have as much as you want."

The grin broadens, and he draws me in for a kiss. "Maybe dinner can wait, then."

"Hmm. Maybe it can…"

Chapter Nineteen

It's no surprise that Michael's completely supportive when Ian and I tell him we need a couple of nights a week to ourselves.

"Like I've said from the beginning," he tells us over dinner, "I don't want to cause any problems between you two. I'm happy to make whatever adjustments help you guys."

Funny how I was so worried about this being a bad idea. I'm married to and sleeping with two of the most levelheaded, laidback men on the planet. While I get worried and convince myself we're on the cusp of disaster, they adapt as if they can't imagine why not.

So on an evening when Ian's swamped with papers to grade—which he neglected for a few nights in a row because of both Michael and me—he gives me a kiss, tells me to have a good time and reminds me to kiss Michael for him. And it's completely normal. This has become normal in our house. Which is weird when I think about it, but living it feels exactly that: normal.

As does walking into Michael's house, saying hi to Cody and continuing into Michael's kitchen, where he's waiting with a glass of wine in his hand.

"Right on time." He sets the glass down and wraps his arms around me. "As always."

"Couldn't possibly be late." I kiss him lightly. "By the way, Ian says hello. And he sends"—I cup Michael's neck and kiss him again, longer and deeper, just the way Ian likes it—"that."

Michael grins. "I'll definitely make sure to send one home for him too." He holds my gaze, and the grin falters a bit. "I, um…I'm actually glad it's just you and me tonight, though."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

He rests his forearms on my shoulders. "Because I want tonight to be different. It's been all about me from the beginning. Tonight, it needs to be about you."

"But we—"

He kisses me, and my resistance doesn't stand a chance. Some nights, we talk for a while, and maybe go through a little bit of wine, but sometimes we cut right to the chase. This is going to be one of those nights, according to this languid bedroom kiss.

After some long, undefined expanse of time, he draws back and meets my gaze. "I know this has been stressful for you. Fun, yeah, but let's be real. I know you've worried about me, and about your marriage." He takes my hand and leads me toward the bedroom. "I just want you to know that I appreciate it."

"I know you do, Michael. I've never doubted that for a second."

"Still." He pauses. "I think we should finish this conversation in the bedroom."

It seems like a topic that can easily kill the mood, but I do what I've done since the start—follow Michael's lead. Into his bedroom. Out of our clothes. Into his bed. Into another long, tangled kiss.

Without breaking the kiss, Michael rolls me onto my back. Then, he moves from my lips to my jaw, and continues down my neck. "I've told you time and again how much you've done for me, and how much it means to me." Kiss by kiss, he inches down my torso. "Tonight, I want to show you."

"Show me? How are…"

As he starts down my abs, his eyes flick up to meet mine, and the pieces snap together.

He's really…

He passes my navel, pausing now and then to flick his tongue across my skin.

Oh my God.

His lips mark a slow, gentle path along the edge of my hipbone.

He is.

He starts at the base of my cock, drawing little circles with the tip of his tongue, and my breath is gone. Just gone. My eyes water, and it's more than arousal. I can't even believe what I'm seeing, what I'm feeling—Michael's going down on me?

He works his way from the base to the head, kissing and teasing. Just like that very first time a lifetime ago, he's taking his time, working up the confidence while he's turning me inside out.

He rests a hand on my hip, quite possibly to keep me still, and runs the tip of his tongue along the underside of my cock. And when he reaches the head, I expect him to go back down, but instead—

Holy. Fucking. *Hell.*

His lips slide down over the head. Before I can catch my breath from that, he runs his tongue around it. Again, back the other way. He doesn't take me very deep, but that's just fine by me—what he's doing is…so…*good.*

I want so badly to grip his hair, to run my fingers through it, but I don't know if that's welcome. Not when it's taken him so much just to work up the nerve to do this. So I grab the pillow and hold on, forcing myself to stay still even when my hips desperately want to rock in time with his strokes. On the plus side, staying still keeps me from coming too fast—thank God, because this really is our first time all over again, and I want to savor it even more than I did then.

There's no putting off an orgasm indefinitely, though. I grip the pillow tighter and try to stay still. Try to hold back. Not a chance.

“K-keep doing that,” I slur. “And you’ll make me come.” I’m half-expecting him to continue anyway, like he did the first time, but he stops. He lifts his head and pushes himself onto his arms.

“I do want to make you come,” he breathes as he moves up over me, “but I want to fuck you.” He shudders, pressing his rock hard cock against me. “I want to be inside you when you come.”

Oh fuck yes.

I moisten my dry lips. “How?”

“My favorite position, of course.”

“Perfect.” I love it when he fucks me this way. The angle, the view—it’s all perfect. And it means I don’t have to move, which is even better, since he’s turned my spine and limbs to jelly.

Michael sits up and puts on some lube. My pulse is going crazy as he pushes my legs apart and positions himself.

The head of his cock breaches me, and as thick as he is, it makes my eyes water. Then he pulls out and does it again. And again. And again. I want him all the way inside me, every last goddamned inch of him, but that shallow fucking is enough to drive me insane.

Michael rests his weight on his hands, pushes with his hips and slides all the way inside me. And just in case I have any sanity left, he withdraws almost completely and does it all over again. He fucks me painfully slowly, drawing out each stroke until I’m ready to come unglued.

“Like that?” he asks as he pulls out again.

“So much. You fucking tease.”

“Me?” He flashes a toothy grin and then *slams* into me. “I have no idea what you mean.”

I can’t think of a comeback. My brain’s gone blank, and he’s pulling out again, and…*yes, please, please, do it again. Do it—oh fuck!*

He doesn’t let up now. He’s pounding me deep and hard, relentlessly, reducing my vocabulary to helpless near-sobs. I manage to grip the back of his neck with one hand, pump my dick with the other, and I’m in heaven. He’s kissing me, he’s fucking me, and everything’s…everything’s perfect.

A tremor ripples through my whole body. I break the kiss with a gasp, and arch off the bed. Whatever rhythm my hand had, it’s gone now, but I don’t care.

And suddenly Michael pulls out.

And he pushes my hand away.

What the—

His mouth closes around my cock. He slides his fingers inside me and crooks them, and he’s fucking me with them, and…and…

“Oh my God,” I whimper. “Michael, I’m—”

Gone.

Just…gone.

The whole world explodes. He keeps going, keeps sucking my cock and finger-fucking me, and I just keep coming, and coming, and coming.

"S-stop." I gasp for breath. "Fuck. Stop…"

Michael stops. Gives me a moment to breathe. Then he slips his fingers free. He comes back up, and even more than the very first time, I have to kiss him. I have to taste this and convince myself it's real. That Michael really did knock down that last obstacle.

God, yes. It is real. The salt in his mouth is as real as the fading shockwaves of my orgasm. He really did it.

"I thought…" I gulp, trying not to kill the mood. "I thought you wanted to be fucking me when I came."

"I did." He kisses me again, lightly this time. "I changed my mind."

"Jesus." I blink a few times. "You haven't come yet, though." I reach for the bottle of lube. "Let me do something about that."

"Don't have to tell me twice." He rolls onto his back. I lie beside him, pour a little lube on my hand and then close my fingers around his cock.

Michael kisses me, but before long, he's too out of breath to keep kissing me. Instead, he gazes down, watching me pump his dick, and then he closes his eyes and lets his head fall back. "Oh yeah… Oh…" He groans and bites his lip.

I stroke him faster, adding a slight twist to my strokes.

Michael grabs on to my shoulder and thrusts into my fist. "Fuck, Josh. Keep…" He trails off into a choked whimper, and a split second later, he comes, fucking my hand erratically until he shivers and sinks back onto the bed.

I kiss him lightly. "Have I ever mentioned how hot it is to watch you come?"

He grins even as he's catching his breath. "Any time you wanna watch, I'm more than happy to oblige."

"Of course you are. Dork."

He just chuckles, and I turn away to grab the tissues off the nightstand.

After the dust settles and we're tangled up under the sheets, I meet his gaze. "You went down on me."

He laughs. "You noticed."

I roll my eyes and tousle his hair. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do." He kisses me softly. "I've been trying to work up the nerve for a while, and part of me just realized how stupid it was to be afraid to do anything with you." He caresses my cheek. "Because you've proven time after time after time what I've known without a

doubt since we were kids—that there's no one I trust more than you."

"Of course you can trust me," I whisper. "Always."

"I know." He smiles tightly. "The thing is, I kind of feel stupid for not coming to you about this years ago. Or even telling you what happened."

"You didn't have to."

"No, but it would've done me some good. I didn't know how badly I needed my sexuality back until I started *getting* it back. For the first time in years, I actually feel like *me* again. Completely. I didn't even realize how important it was to me, and how much I missed it until… until you…" He exhales, and then he kisses me, letting the soft contact linger for a moment. "Josh, you and Ian gave me back the last thing Steve took away from me."

I'm…speechless.

Michael sweeps his tongue across his lips. "What he did, it'll always be there. What's done is done. But now it's like when I fucked up my knee in high school. There's still some damage, and it still gives me trouble once in a while, but it's *healed*. And that's how this feels too. Like it's less of an open wound now and more of a scar." He clasps both his hands around one of mine, and the intensity in his eyes damn near drives me to tears even before he whispers, "Which means I can finally move on."

I still can't speak, so I just free my hand and wrap my arms around him, and that doesn't really help me get my emotions under control.

After a moment, I clear my throat. "He didn't deserve a single piece of you. I'm so glad Ian and I helped you get this one back."

"Me too." He holds me tighter. "Thank you, Josh. This means the world to me."

I kiss the top of his head. "You're welcome."

Because you *mean the world to me, Michael.*

Chapter Twenty

A few days after Ian and I reconnect, I'm meeting Michael for lunch. That's not unusual; we've been having lunch together a couple of times a week ever since I started working on the same side of town as the vet clinic.

But when he walks through the door of our usual restaurant, I do a double take. There's a grin on Michael's face that he can't quite suppress, and he's definitely trying. When he takes his seat across from me, he's practically bouncing.

I cock my head. "What?"

"Hmm?" He presses his lips together, but that only makes it worse. "What?"

"You know what."

He stops even trying, and that smile takes my breath away. "Dr. Klein was in the clinic this morning."

"Oh yeah? And did you talk to him?"

"I did." He's beaming now. God, he's beautiful when he's this happy. "And uh, I told him I got cold feet before, and asked if the offer was still open."

My jaw drops. "*You* actually asked *him* out?"

Michael laughs. "Come on, don't sound quite so surprised."

"Well, I…"

"It's okay." He reaches across the table and puts his hand on my arm. "It kinda surprised me too."

"So, was the offer still open?" As if I need to ask.

Michael squeezes my arm, then withdraws his hand. "We're having dinner tomorrow night. Then I guess, um…" He laughs, sounding nervous and relieved at the same time. "I guess we'll see what happens."

I chuckle, arching my eyebrow. "You don't have to call him Dr. Klein over dinner, do you?"

"No. It's just a habit at the clinic." He smiles, and I'm surprised little hearts don't appear in his eyes. "I guess I'll have to get used to calling him Ben."

The sound of the doctor's first name hits me in the chest for some reason. "I'm sure you'll get used to it."

"Just have to remember not to call him that at the clinic. Ah, hell. If I do, who cares, right?"

"Though hey, what better way to remind yourself you're dating a doctor?"

"We're not dating. It's one—"

“Not yet.” I grin. “But after tomorrow…”

“We’ll see.” Michael picks up the menu, even though he and I have both memorized it a hundred times over. He gives it a cursory glance before he lays it down again and meets my gaze, that grin still crinkling the corners of his eyes. “This is so weird. I haven’t been on an actual date in ages.”

“Well, don’t expect me to come over and help you pick out what to wear.”

Michael snorts. “Right. That’ll be the day.”

“So where are you guys going?”

His lips quirk. “I don’t know. We didn’t get that far. We’re meeting at the clinic since we both know where it is.” He half shrugs. “I guess we’ll see what happens after that.”

I smile, though I’m not sure why it takes so much work. “I guess we will.”

~*~

After lunch, we both need to get back to work, but neither of us is in a huge rush on the way out to the parking lot. The walkway seems shorter today, though, and too soon, we’re at the curb.

Our eyes meet. This is usually the moment for “have a good one” and “see you next time” and “try not to choke anyone at work” before we both walk away—him to his car, me to my office. But we’re not moving, and we’re not speaking, and we’re not leaving.

My heart speeds up. “So, um…”

This silence is fucking stubborn. I need to get back to work before my boss gives me the evil eye, but I can’t make myself say good-bye.

Suddenly, Michael steps forward, puts his arms around me and hugs me tight. “Tomorrow night wouldn’t be happening if it hadn’t been for you.” His voice wavers a bit, and he whispers, “Thank you so much, Josh.”

“You’re welcome.” I hold him close and squeeze my eyes shut. “I’m so glad you’re back on an even keel.”

“Me too.”

He doesn’t let go. Neither do I.

“Good luck tomorrow,” I whisper. “I really hope this works out for you.”

“So do I.” He finally releases me, and when our eyes meet, his are clearer and brighter than they’ve been in a while. “Even if it doesn’t, I think…” He shrugs. “I think I’m okay with that. If it doesn’t work out with him, it will with someone else.”

“Of course it will. Any guy would be lucky to have you.”

Michael smiles. “Well, I’ll let you know how it goes.”

I smile back. “I can’t wait to hear.”
Be good to him, Dr. Klein…

Chapter Twenty-One

The next night, as we have so many times over the years, Ian and I cuddle up on the couch with the animals to watch TV. Ariel is taking up more space than she has any right to. Rosie is on the armrest, letting Ian pet her while she stays firmly out of my reach. In front of us is a rerun of The Big Bang Theory—I can almost lip synch the dialogue because we've seen this one five hundred times, but the jokes are still funny. This is as normal as it gets in this house, but it feels all wrong.

I glance at my phone. It's eight thirty.

By now, Dr. Klein and Michael are probably sitting in a restaurant somewhere, making conversation over drinks and appetizers, shyly fumbling their way through first-date nerves even though they've known each other for ages.

And that's the problem, isn't it? We're here, and Michael's out there, and I wonder if I'm even more nervous than he is tonight.

But it's not just nerves. I can't get comfortable. Can't settle. Even when I remind myself a hundred times over that Dr. Klein is arguably the safest, gentlest man any of us know, there's something else still tugging at my consciousness.

It's almost like the letdown that comes after an exhilarating experience, but it doesn't make any sense. This process with Michael has been about getting him back on his feet. What he's doing tonight is exactly what we've been trying to help him achieve—the confidence and courage to take a chance with another man.

So why do I feel so empty?

Empty. That's what it is.

And here comes the guilt. I resist the urge to fidget beside Ian and draw his attention to my discomfort, because this is something I really don't want to explain. I'm not entirely sure I *can* explain it, but I damn sure don't want to. How the fuck would I tell my husband I feel down and sad because Michael's not here tonight? Because Michael's out with another man, and all three of us have our fingers crossed that it works out?

I cuddle closer to Ian, ostensibly to give our ever-expanding dog some more room, and rest my head on his chest. Ian kisses the top of my head and adjusts his arm around my shoulders.

This is perfect. What the fuck is wrong with me? I've never once felt like there was anything missing in my marriage. Ian isn't perfect, but he's the perfect man for me—I'd sworn off marriage and monogamy alike right up until I realized I was in love with him.

There's nothing missing from my marriage to Ian, but where is this hollow feeling coming from? I've always been thrilled when Michael finds somebody—even that asshole, before I knew what he was really like—but tonight, I'm floundering.

Out of nowhere, Ian says, "You think he's having a good time?"

My head snaps toward Ian. "Huh?"

"Michael." He looks at me like I've lost my mind. "What?"

"I'm just, uh…" *Surprised you're thinking of him too*. I clear my throat and shrug. "I hope he's having a good time. God knows he deserves it."

"Yeah, he does." Ian's expression hardens a bit. "And God help that vet if he doesn't treat him right."

That protectiveness sends a tingle right through me, and I fidget to mask a shiver. "No shit."

"It sounds like he will, though. My fingers are definitely crossed for him."

"Mine too."

Ian eyes me. "You don't sound all that enthusiastic?"

"I am." My face burns. "Is it wrong that I'm going to be kind of disappointed when Michael moves on?" I cringe at my own words. "I mean, the sooner he's in a good place, the better, but…"

"I know what you mean." Ian takes my hand, and a little smile works its way onto his lips. "I think we'd both be lying if we said we haven't enjoyed being with him, particularly now that it's not so rough on him anymore."

"True." Why doesn't that explanation feel like enough? "I guess it has been pretty fun for all three of us, especially the more he's recovered."

"It has." Ian grins. "Let's face it—our sex life is better than it's been in a long time."

I can't really argue with that. We've been having more sex lately than we have for the past few years, and it's been absolutely smoking hot. Not that it was ever lacking, but lately it's been better. Just like our marriage—nothing has been missing all these years, but tonight it suddenly feels like there is.

Shame turns my stomach. It's just an adjustment, that's all. There is absolutely nothing missing in my marriage.

"Damn," Ian says. "How is it already quarter to ten?"

Where is Michael now? Are he and Dr. Klein—

No, no, no. Don't need to think about that.

"Time flies, I guess."

"It always does." Ian kisses my temple. "We should head to bed. Some of us have to be up at the crack of dawn."

"Sucks to be you," I say with a halfhearted laugh. "And what the

hell? It's not even that late yet."

"Uh-huh. But if we go to bed now…"

Oh.

Oh.

~*~

Ian's alarm startles me awake. I usually sleep through it, or if I wake up at all, it's not for long, but this time, he may as well have kicked me.

As he always does, he slips out of bed almost silently and goes into the bathroom to take a shower and get ready for work. That's my cue to start drifting off again. He'll wake me briefly with a kiss goodbye, murmur "I love you" in my ear, and then he'll leave me to sleep until my own alarm screeches.

Except that drifting-off part isn't happening. At all.

I listen to the shower come on. A few minutes later, it turns off again. The faucet runs. His razor clinks against the edge of the sink.

Fuck. I'm not going back to sleep, am I? With as much time as I spent wide awake last night, I could've used that extra hour or two of sleep, but it's not happening. Might as well get up.

Rosie is still curled up on Ian's pillow, and Ariel is sprawled across the foot of the bed. I carefully pull my legs out from under her so I don't wake her up. She's not much of a morning dog, though, and just grumbles and fidgets a little.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, I rub my eyes as if that'll actually banish the fatigue. At this hour? Not likely.

Coffee, we're going to be really good buddies today.

I grumble some profanity as I push myself to my feet.

Like he always does, Ian's got the bathroom door open to let the cool air in now that the shower has steamed everything up. He's halfway through shaving when I lean against the doorframe. He glances at me as he rinses his razor.

"You're awake."

"Well, that's being generous." I yawn and rub my eyes again.

"Can't sleep?"

I shake my head. "Might as well get up and get moving."

"Thinking about Michael?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"No." He tilts his head back and draws the razor up his neck. "But I was thinking about him a lot last night too."

I shift uncomfortably. "Were you?"

"Kind of hard not to." He glances at me, but then continues focusing on shaving. As he works his way along the side of his throat,

he says, “Even if I hadn’t gotten physically involved, I’m still worried about the guy. And after I got involved…”

I raise my eyebrows.

He rinses his razor and glances at me again. “I don’t know. I guess I just felt more…invested. I’ve always cared about him, first because he was your friend, and then because he was also mine. And I guess getting physical with someone…”

It’s a struggle not to shift and fidget, especially as we both silently watch his reflection while he finishes his neck and jaw. If Ian’s gotten in deeper now that they’ve gotten physical, what does that mean for me?

That’s probably not something I want to think about. Especially not before I’ve had coffee.

Ian finishes shaving and dries his face. “Sink’s all yours.”

“Thanks.”

In silence, we go about our routines, and despite the tight quarters, we don’t get underfoot. After all this time, we’ve mastered the art of staying out of each other’s way. Especially since we’ve had to do this with a rambunctious boxer and, at times, a tripping hazard cat in the way.

As I finish brushing my teeth, Ian comes back in, buttoning his crisp white shirt, his shirttails untucked and his tie draped over his shoulders.

“You going to be okay today?”

“I’ll manage.” I shrug as I rinse my toothbrush. “We’ve got that high octane coffee at work now. I should be able to stay awake.”

“That’s not the part I’m worried about.”

I meet his eyes in the mirror. “Yeah. That. I’m, um, having lunch with him today. I’ll find out how last night went.”

He rests his chin on my shoulder and wraps his arms around my waist. “Let me know?”

“I will. Definitely.”

Neither of us speaks, and he doesn’t let me go. It’s way too early in the morning for awkward silence, but there it is.

After a while, Ian finally says, “Listen, um…” He breaks eye contact but nuzzles the side of my neck, as if he wants to avoid my gaze but still maintain this affectionate embrace. “Maybe it’s just as well that Michael’s back on his own two feet now.”

Of course it is. It’s great that he’s confident enough to pursue something with another man. But I don’t think that’s what Ian’s getting at.

I reach back and rest my hand in his short hair. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’m starting to think this isn’t healthy anymore.” He kisses the back of my shoulder. “For you. It’s eating you alive.”

I lower my hand and sigh.

Ian keeps his eyes down. “If he does need more of this, we need to think about how long we let it continue. Before you start doing more damage to yourself than—”

“I’ll be fine.” I gently free myself and turn around. “Really. I will.”

He scowls and rests his hand on the back of my neck. “I want to believe that, but I know you.” He draws me in for a soft kiss. “You’re the kind of person who’d get yourself killed pulling someone out of a burning building.”

“I’m not saving him from a burning building.”

“Not literally, but you are going to be collateral damage if you’re not careful.”

“Then what do you think I should do?” I wrap my arms around his waist. “What should *we* do?”

“Well, last night will be a test of how far he’s really come. Maybe he’s ready to move on, and that’s great. But if he’s not…” Ian chews his lip. “That’s where things could get tricky. Because I want us both to see this through for his sake, but I also want to put a stop to it for yours. Except if he still needs us after last night, then that’s the worst possible time for us to call time on it, and…” Ian shakes his head. “How am I supposed to tell a wounded man he can’t have more of what helps him?”

My heart falls into the pit of my stomach. Pulling my husband close, I whisper, “I don’t know. I have no idea what we’re supposed to do now.”

“Talk to him. See how last night went.” Ian kisses my forehead. “Then we’ll all figure out where to go from there.”

I nod, not sure what else to say. I can’t explain my feelings to Ian. Not until I sort them out in my own head, anyway.

Ian glances at his watch. “Damn. I have to go.” He cups my neck in both hands and presses his lips to mine. “We’ll talk over dinner tonight. Okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He leaves the bathroom, and I listen as his footsteps continue down the stairs and across the hardwood foyer. When the door shuts, I release my breath. As the garage door rumbles open beneath my feet, I lean over the counter, holding on to its cool faux marble edge for balance.

I need to get my head together. I have no business feeling like this. Michael went on a date last night, and there is nothing in the world I want more than to hear that it was perfect. I hope like hell that I get a text from him before lunch. Something like, *Can’t make it.*

Long night. ;)

I hope and pray he spent the night with Dr. Klein, and the two of them are still lying there and enjoying each other's company. He wasted enough of his life with a man who caused him to call in sick too many times because of ER visits. He deserves nothing less than someone who makes him call in sick because they can't get enough of each other.

And somehow, for the sake of my friendship, my marriage, and my own sanity, I have got to get rid of this sudden jealous bone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"So how did it go?"

Across the booth at our usual restaurant, Michael doesn't answer. He's not looking me in the eye, and he's not touching the food that showed up a couple of minutes ago.

My pulse ratchets up—it's a struggle not to prod him, and at the same time, I'm afraid to hear the truth. With everything Michael's been through, I hope to God it was only a disappointing first date. Maybe Dr. Klein was less attractive without the stethoscope around his neck, or he had some heinous political views, or he turned out to be estranged from his toothbrush. Maybe he ordered veal at dinner—that would be a one-way ticket to Nopeville in Michael's book.

I nibble on a fry, mostly because I need to do something besides sit here and stare him down. He seems uncomfortable enough without my scrutiny.

Then, releasing a breath, Michael pushes his untouched plate away. "Well, the date went fine. I had a pretty good time, and I think he did too." A smile tries to work its way onto his lips. "Ben's an awesome guy."

"You don't sound happy, though." My chest tightens—*please, please, don't let him say it went* that *kind of wrong*.

Michael's eyes lose focus. "It seemed like it was going okay. We had dinner, and then we went to a comedy club. After that, he took me back to my car." He releases a long breath. "And he kissed me."

I can't breathe. *Klein, if you did anything to fuck with him…* "What happened?"

Michael rests his elbow on the table and rubs his forehead. "God, it actually started even before that. The thing is, the whole night, I felt like something was missing. I wasn't bored, but I wasn't as into it as I thought I'd be. Like I couldn't get into it even though I wanted to." He drops his hand on the table and exhales. "I was on a date with Ben Klein, for God's sake!"

I stare at him, completely at a loss for words.

Michael leans back against the cushion. "And then as soon as he kissed me, I got it. I figured out what was missing."

"And that was…"

His eyes meet mine. "You and Ian."

My heart stops. My mouth has gone dry, but I manage to choke out, "What?"

He flinches, looking out at something across the restaurant instead of at me. His voice is so soft, it's almost timid as he murmurs, "As

soon as he kissed me, all I could think of was the two of you."

"But you've been wanting him for—"

"I know. And when I finally had a shot with him…" He laughs humorlessly. "All I could think of was how much I wanted to be with you and Ian. Because I—" His voice cracks.

I can't even fit all this in my brain, never mind put my finger on what it means. All I know is the way I felt last night, and how I feel now looking at him. There are some pieces in my head threatening to come together, and I keep trying to push them apart because I have a feeling the big picture isn't one that'll help this situation. Even while I'm hurting for him because I know how much he wanted his date to work out, why is there…relief? Guilt? Shame? What the fuck?

"So, yeah." Michael groans. "I fucking blew it. Because I…" He buries his face in both hands. "This must sound incredibly stupid."

"You'd be surprised."

Michael lowers his hands and searches my eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning…" *I love you.*

The thought hits me like a fist to the gut.

Oh shit. Oh. Shit.

I can't. But I do.

Oh God. I do.

Staring at Michael, holding his gaze from across the table while he waits for me to tell him why his feelings aren't as stupid as he thinks they are, everything I felt last night suddenly makes way too much sense.

Fuck.

I rub the back of my neck. "Maybe things got more complicated than we thought they would. For all of us."

His eyebrow slowly rises.

So does my pulse.

I scramble to collect my thoughts and explain myself, but there's no easy way to say it. Knowing he's got feelings like this too, that doesn't help the situation, because I don't know how to tell him I love him in the same breath I need to tell him I'm terrified for my marriage. There are two men in this world who I'd step in front of a bullet for, and I'm scared out of my mind that there's no way we're all getting through this without one of them—all of us—getting hurt.

Before I can find the words, Michael puts up his hands. "Look, I think we can both agree this got really complicated, but I need to cut to the chase. Whatever's going on, I need to put on the brakes. On all of this."

A weird mix of disappointment and relief and hurt twist in my stomach. Like I've been issued a pardon and a kick in the balls at the same time. "Oh."

He puts his elbows on the table again and steeples his fingers in front of his lips. “I’m sorry.” He closes his eyes and releases a long breath. “The thing is, over the course of five years, Steve convinced me I was trash. And since we started this whole thing, you and Ian haven’t just made me feel like I can have an actual sex life again.” He opens his eyes. “You’ve made me feel like I’m worth loving again.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. *Why do you think I’ve been in love with you for twenty years?* But I can’t say that. It’ll only complicate this conversation, and I’m not so sure I can get the words out anyway. It’s hard enough to convince my mouth to form, “Michael, you *are* worth loving.”

“Maybe I am. But it’s been a long, long time since I’ve been able to feel anything for anyone. And I’m not sure I trust those feelings.”

I tilt my head. “Trust them? What do you mean?”

He chews his lip for a moment, staring at the table between us. Without lifting his gaze, he says, “Dr. Hamilton told me early on that she’s had problems with patients who’ve fallen in love with her. One of her colleagues has had the same thing happen. They’re not really in love with *her*, they’re…”

My heart sinks as I realize where he’s going with this. “They’re in love with the person who helped them.”

Michael nods. “She said it’s kind of like the Florence Nightingale effect, but in reverse. The patient falling for the caregiver.”

“Transference?”

“Yeah. That.”

And the sinking feeling gets even worse. Is that what’s happened to me? And Ian, for that matter? Is that all this is?

No. That’s not possible. Not when I’ve had feelings for Michael since we were kids.

Except they’ve never been as intense as they are now. As they’ve been since that first night I joined Michael in his bed.

I’m still collecting my thoughts, but Michael continues. “Listen, I can’t thank you and Ian enough for everything you’ve done for me.” He holds my gaze, though he struggles. “I’m in a much, much better place now because of you guys.”

“I’m glad we could help,” I say numbly.

“Me too. But I think I need to spend some time on my own. So I can, you know, sort out what I feel and…” He sighs. “I don’t even know. But I don’t want to fuck up your marriage, and I don’t want to fuck up our friendship.” His eyes flick up again, meeting mine through his lashes. “So this isn’t forever. I just need to figure a few things out.”

Now it’s definitely feeling more like a kick in the balls than a pardon, and I fight the urge to reach for his arm. How weird—he’s so much more comfortable with physical contact than before, and

everything that made him more comfortable with it adds up to why I can't make myself touch him now. We got too close. We let this get too deep. And I will not be the one who makes him second guess his decision—not after I've seen just how hard it is for him to walk away from someone he shouldn't have been with in the first place.

"When you're ready," I say, willing my voice to remain even, "you know where to find us. The door's always open."

He nods but doesn't look at me. "I know. And that means a lot. But I need…"

"Some time?"

"Yeah."

What can I say to that? "Anything you need."

Michael searches my eyes for a moment. Then he looks down at his plate, and his nose wrinkles a bit as if he's wondering why the hell he ordered anything in the first place. "Listen …"

My stomach twists as he reaches for his wallet.

"I'm gonna go." He fishes out a twenty and sets it beside his untouched meal. "I'll be in touch, though. I promise."

When?

I just nod. "Okay. Take care of yourself, all right?"

"I will." He slides out of the booth and glances at me, but doesn't let the eye contact linger. "Give Ian my best?"

"Absolutely."

Our eyes meet again. I don't know what to say, and he doesn't offer anything. After several long, uncomfortable seconds, he turns to go, and it takes every bit of restraint I have not to jump up and run after him. As he walks down the narrow row between tables, hands in his pockets and head down, my chest physically aches.

This doesn't hurt as bad as all the times I watched him go back to Steve.

But damn, it's a close second.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lying by omission and a quick subject change get me out of an uncomfortable conversation with Ian.

"How did Michael's date go?"

"Sounds like it went fine, but there probably won't be a second date."

"Damn. That's too bad."

"Yeah, it is. Have you eaten yet?"

Then it's dinner I can't taste, TV shows I can't focus on and wine that doesn't do me a damned bit of good.

And now we're in bed. Ian's sound asleep even though Rosie has almost pushed him off his pillow. Between us, the dog is snoring.

I haven't even started drifting off yet. I've been listening to my husband and pets breathe while the conversation with Michael replays over and over and over inside my head. The guilt and shame keep burrowing deeper. I want to wake Ian, tell him everything and beg forgiveness. I want to call Michael and do the same.

I check my phone for the thousandth time. 2:28 a.m. Two minutes since the last time I checked. This night is either going to last forever, or it's going to eat me alive before dawn.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. My conscience can't handle being this close to my husband while I'm pining after someone else. Because whether I want to admit it or not, that's exactly what I'm doing. I miss Michael.

I move as carefully and quietly as I can, put on a pair of sweats and slip out of the bedroom. By the grace of God, I don't wake the dog, because she would've woken Ian.

While everyone else sleeps, I make my way down to the kitchen, fully intending to pour myself a drink. But by the time I get there, I can't do it—I have to work in a few hours. I'm going to be a waste of space, but I don't want a DUI during my morning commute. And if I start drinking now, it'll be enough to get me a DUI in six hours.

I rest my hands on the counter's cool edge and stare out into the darkness of the backyard. What little moonlight there is hints at the outline of the gazebo and hot tub, and my mind's eye fills in the rest. Relaxing with Ian and Michael. Fooling around with Ian. Watching them kiss for the first time. Fooling around with both of them.

I shiver.

There's got to be a solution to this situation. Feelings are what they are. I'm not obligated to act on them, and neither is Michael. Once he collects his thoughts and reestablishes contact, we can talk it

out and agree that we don't have to cross more lines than we already have.

But can I look Ian in the eye and tell him that things didn't go too far? And can I look Michael in the eye and not hurt because I can't touch him?

How the fuck do I make this work?

A chill works its way through me. My heart's racing and my stomach's definitely glad I didn't have that drink after all. It's like I'm watching a train wreck in slow motion—it's happening, the wheels are in motion, and there's nothing I can do except hold my breath and wait for the inevitable.

I'm not panicking yet, but it's coming. I've felt Ian slipping away before. I've felt Michael slipping away before. Never both at the same time. The thought of losing either of them is devastating—both? Oh fuck.

My heart pounds even harder. I'm overreacting. Right? This is bigger in my head than it is in reality. It doesn't have to play out badly. It doesn't have to play out at all. Michael will respect that I want to be faithful to my husband. I'll respect that he wants to maintain our friendship. It's that simple. Isn't it?

Soft footsteps raise the hairs on the back of my neck.

No, no, no. Go back to bed, Ian. Please, go back to bed.

"Josh?"

I cringe. I can't even look at him, and my throat's so tight, I can barely breathe, never mind speak.

He stops behind me. "It's almost three in the morning."

"I know." I still don't turn around. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Never mind that. What are *you* doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"You okay?"

I can't even produce an automatic *Yeah, I'm fine*, and every second of silence gives the answer I didn't want to—no, I'm not okay.

"Josh?" He steps closer. "Is this about Michael?"

The sound of Ian saying Michael's name snaps whatever tenuous thread has been holding me together.

"Fuck." I whisper, and I lose it.

"Whoa, hey." Ian wraps his arms around me. "Easy." He gently turns me around and holds me close, tenderly stroking my hair and completely oblivious to what he's doing to my conscience. "Take it easy."

There's no reining this back in and pretending nothing's wrong. Ian's only seen me cry a handful of times, so he knows damn well my tears aren't on a hair trigger. Which means we're talking about this.

We're talking about it tonight. And he won't take *it's nothing* or *I'm really okay* and let it go.

"This really has been hard on you, hasn't it?" he whispers, and goddammit, I can't do it.

I pull in a deep breath, clear my throat and try to collect my composure. "Yeah, it's about Michael. Ever since he went out with Dr. Klein, I…"

"I understand."

No, you don't. Trust me.

But he goes on. "You've seen firsthand the damage someone did to him. It's okay to have a hard time with him going to someone else who could hurt him again."

There's that, yes. But there's… But I…

How am I supposed to tell Ian there's so much more to it than that? That I'm not just scared of Michael getting hurt again? That it hurts like hell to watch him go, especially now that he's admitted to feeling things that I feel too, things that Ian would divorce me over if he knew?

Except I can't lie to him. If I do, he'll see right through me and drag out the truth anyway. But what will he do when the truth comes out? How the fuck do I tell my husband I love someone else and convince him I still love him too?

Because that's the crux of it, isn't it? I love Michael. No two ways about it. But my feelings for Ian haven't changed. If anything, I've fallen even more in love with him recently. His compassion for Michael, the way he's so patiently and gently helped me guide Michael back to a place where he can be intimate with men again—how could I not?

"I need…" I step back, safely out of his embrace, and wipe my eyes. "I need to be honest about something."

Ian's eyebrows jump above the frames of his glasses. "Okay?"

Where do I even start? "Everything we've done with him, I…"

Ian tenses, as if he's on the verge of folding his arms across his chest, but he doesn't. And he doesn't speak.

I clear my throat again. "I am so sorry, Ian. I thought I could do this without feelings getting involved, but—"

"Feelings?" His voice is quiet and completely neutral.

"Yeah." I slump back against the counter and let my head rest against the cupboard. "I don't know if it's…" My conversation with Michael flashes through my mind again. I close my eyes. "Maybe it's the whole Florence Nightingale thing. I don't know."

"You're in love with him." It's not a hard-edged accusation—more like a resigned statement of fact.

A fact I can't deny.

Swallowing hard, I meet his gaze. “Yeah.”

“I see.”

“This doesn’t change how I feel about you.” Why does it sound so fucking pathetic when I say it?

He studies me. I can’t tell if he’s angry, hurt, skeptical, or if nothing’s quite settled in his brain yet. Then, without speaking, he pulls out a chair and sits at the kitchen table, gesturing for me to do the same. I hesitate but finally join him.

If I’d manned up and broached this subject last night, we both could’ve had a drink, but at this hour, Ian has to be up soon for work. He’ll probably be showing up at school with red eyes as it is; no sense adding a hangover to the mix. It’s both too early and too late for coffee, so there’s nothing to do except face each other across the table.

Ian takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. “So what happens now?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to make sense of everything. Guess I hadn’t gotten that far yet.” My stomach is threatening to climb up my throat, and I try my damnedest not to get sick. “The last thing I want to do is leave, though.”

He lowers his hand, puts his glasses back on and meets my gaze.

The sick feeling gets even worse. *I don’t want* you *to leave either*.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, as if that might somehow magically fix anything.

Ian’s face still betrays nothing, and neither does his voice. “There’s something I’m curious about.” He thumbs the edge of the table, watching that instead of looking at me. “Even though I’m not really sure I want to know the answer.”

I gulp. “Okay.”

He’s quiet for a long time. Every passing second makes me itch—it’s never good when Ian isn’t sure what to say. Finally, he lowers his hand into his lap, and he looks me in the eye. “If you and I had never met, do you think—”

“Ian.” I shake my head. “Don’t go there. Please.”

“No, I think we need to go there.” He holds my gaze. “How do you think things would have turned out with him?”

He never would have met Steve.

I banish that thought as quickly as it materializes, and I stare at the table between us. In ten years, I’ve never struggled this hard to look my husband in the eye, but it’s a challenge tonight. “I don’t know, to be honest. I really don’t.” I run a hand through my hair, and with some more effort, meet his gaze. “It wasn’t in the cards. And it’s impossible to say what would’ve happened if I’d never met you, because I *did* meet you, and my whole life’s been different since then.”

His lips are taut, but he doesn’t speak.

“I love you, Ian,” I say softly. “Yeah, Michael and I have a long past, and yeah, there was a time when I thought we’d have a long future. But that was before I met you.”

“So this isn’t new. How you feel about him.”

I blink. “I—what? Look, you know he and I dated in the past, and yeah, I’ve always felt something for him.”

“But not like this.”

That stops me in my tracks. No, not like this. Not even close.

Abruptly, though, Ian scoots his chair back from the table. “It’s three in the morning. We both need to get some sleep.”

“But what about—”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow.” There’s still no anger or hostility in his voice. It’s still that same quiet resignation that cuts right to the bone.

He stands. So do I.

Sleep is a lost cause, but I follow him upstairs anyway. Maybe we’ll have one of those miraculous “I’m too upset to talk, but let’s fuck anyway” moments, and then we can talk a little more before we try to go to sleep. Somehow it’s always easier to see eye to eye when we’re both covered in the same sweat.

But Ian doesn’t even look at me. Neither of us speaks as we rearrange the animals and climb back into bed. I’m used to sleeping with fifty pounds of boxer in the middle. Now, we might as well have an entire team of sled dogs between us.

“Ian.”

“Hmm?”

I try to make out his features in the darkness. “I meant what I said. This doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I know.” I pause, my heart speeding up again. “I love you.”

For the first time, I’m not sure if he believes me.

And deep down, I’m not sure if I blame him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Unsurprisingly, despite the late hour, sleep doesn't come easy. When it does, it comes in fits and starts, and it's fucking awful. In my dreams, Michael's walking away again, and Ian's right on his heels this time. I don't know how many times I wake up in a panic and reach for Ian, and then fall asleep and do it all over again.

It's the longest, most restless night I've had in years.

Asleep or awake, I can't get rid of this feeling that my husband and my best friend are both slipping through my fingers, and I don't know how to make it stop. Especially now that I've fessed up and told Ian the truth. The proverbial cat is out of the bag, and it likes me about as much as Rosie does.

My own sleep-deprived, overstressed, semi-delirious thought almost makes me laugh. Almost. I waver between sort of awake and not quite asleep, and exhaustion finally takes over, apparently, because at some point, the dreams stop waking me up and I don't open my eyes again until my alarm goes off.

Ian's already gone. That's expected, of course, but something doesn't sit right. I don't remember him giving me a kiss before he left for work. There's no way I would've slept through that. Not after last night.

That's not a good sign.

There's not much I can do about it at this point, though, except get out of bed, get dressed and pour enough coffee down my throat to make it through the day. Worrying and obsessing didn't help me sleep, and it's not going to help me work.

By the time I get to the office, it's pretty clear that nothing short of a miracle is going to help me work. I'm absolutely useless. All day, I'm either struggling to stay awake or trying not to obsess over Ian and Michael and the conversation Ian and I need to have when I get home. Assuming he's there. He wouldn't overreact and just walk out, would he? Of course not. Ian's the rational one. He's the one who'll want to talk this all the way through, no matter what. Even if he's already made up his mind and has one foot out the door and a U-Haul on the way.

No, he won't make up his mind just yet. Talk first. Decide later. That's his MO. Now if I can convince my stomach to settle, maybe I can make it through the rest of the day in one piece. Or at least without puking up what little I've eaten throughout the day.

And of course, my go-to tic when I'm uncomfortable—playing with my wedding ring—is only making everything worse.

Good God. I'm a wreck.

When the two-thirty slump shows up, I'm done. Just done. I don't usually play hooky from work, so hopefully my boss will forgive me just this once, and after a quick phone call and some lame excuses, I'm out of there before three o'clock.

All the way home, I'm on the verge of shivering even though I'm not cold. I stay in the right lane on the freeway, not because I want to drive slower than everyone else, but because I want easy access to the shoulder in case this nausea suddenly gets worse.

I make it, though. Up the driveway. Into the garage. Out of the car. Deep breath. Into the house.

Ariel greets me at the door, bouncing and wiggling as she always does, and she gets me to crack the first smile I've managed all day. "Hey, sweetie." I tousle her ears. "You miss me?"

She whips herself in the sides with her tail, and when she spins around in her excitement, she cracks me in the back of the knee with it.

"Hey! Watch it with that thing!" I laugh and pat her side, trying to stay out of the line of fire as her tail continues wagging. "Come on, let's go see—"

Daddy.

My stomach flips. It's go-time. Ian's home, and it's time to have this out. I scratch Ariel's back and then continue into the house. Ian's not in the living room, so with Ariel hot on my heels, I go into the kitchen.

He's at the table with his laptop, the screen reflecting on his lenses, and he's surrounded by neat stacks of white pages. As I step into the room, our eyes meet. He doesn't seem surprised to see me home early, and he doesn't look thrilled either. Just like last night, his poker face offers nothing.

Without a word, he closes his laptop. He takes off his glasses, sets them on top of the computer, and stands up. Now that his glasses are off, the heavy shadows under his eyes are unmistakable. My guilt burrows deeper—guess I wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep last night.

Beside me, Ariel's tail slows, no longer making whip-whip-whip sounds through the air. Ian's got one of her toys on the table, one of the ones that can be filled with kibbles, ready and waiting as if he's been prepared since he got home to gently distract her while we fight it out, so she doesn't get as stressed. He picks it up and hands it to her. She grabs it out of his hand, drops onto the floor by the sink and starts pawing at it to get the treats out.

For a moment, we stand there, facing each other from miles apart. The only sound is Ariel rolling the toy around and crunching on the

treats that fall out, and even that's barely audible over my thumping heart.

"We should…" Ian swallows. "We should talk. About last night."

"I know." My throat tightens, and I take a deep breath. I run a shaky hand through my hair and can't make myself look him in the eye. "I'm sorry. You trusted me to do this with Michael and not get involved like that, and I…" There's no explanation. No rationalizing it and making it nice and pretty so he can brush it off and pretend it never happened. The cold hard truth is that my husband trusted me to have sex with another man, and to keep it as sex and nothing more, and I fell for that man anyway.

I make myself meet his gaze. "I'm sorry, Ian. I wish there was something else I could say. But I'm sorry, and I love you, and I don't want to lose you."

Please tell me I haven't already lost you.

Ian comes closer, and my knees are shaking as badly as they did the day Michael forced us to hash it out after that stupid breakup years ago.

He doesn't say a word. His eyes tell me nothing.

"I'm sorry," I whisper again, sounding so goddamned useless and pathetic.

"I know." He wraps his arms around me, and my knees almost collapse out from under both of us. I want to believe this is silent forgiveness, but I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm scared to death he's just waiting for the right moment to calmly, quietly tell me that he's going to move in with his brother, and we can talk to attorneys next week, and that he hopes we can do this amicably.

Though I'm not sure I want to know, I ask, "What do we do now?"

He doesn't answer right away, but finally says, "Come on. Let's go sit." He leads me into the living room. Rosie is on the couch, so Ian moves her to the back of one of the armchairs. We sit down, a full cushion dividing us. There's still a lot of space between us, much more than I'm comfortable with, but Ian takes my hand. At least that's something—at this point, I'll take it.

Ian takes a deep breath. "I've been doing a lot of thinking since last night." He watches his thumb running back and forth along the backs of my knuckles. "And maybe this whole thing with Michael… Maybe we went about it the wrong way."

The wrong…huh?

I cock my head. "What do you mean?"

He wets his lips and lifts his gaze. "Maybe what we've been doing with him shouldn't be just sex. And maybe it shouldn't be… temporary."

I blink, not sure I heard him right. "What?"

"Maybe you need him." He swallows. "Maybe we both do."

Okay, I definitely heard him right that time, but… *What?* "I don't understand."

Ian takes a deep breath. "The thing is, Michael's been a part of your life forever, and he's been a part of ours ever since we met. He's never tried to intrude. Hell, he kept us together when we fucked up."

"Yeah, true."

"He's never been a third wheel. More like…more like the third corner. And when we started getting physically involved with him, it was…" He's quiet for a moment, eyes unfocused. "The thing is, look how fast he was willing to let me join the picture, even with all that trauma still hanging over him. And I cared from the start about him getting past all his flashbacks and panics, but when I was really involved in it…" He grimaces.

"It hurts. To watch someone you care that much about going through that."

"Yeah, it does." His voice wavers, and he clears his throat. "Maybe that should've told me something. And I guess I can't help wondering if this—the feelings and wanting more—was inevitable."

My heart speeds up and my stomach flips. "Inevitable? What do you mean?"

"For the three of us to get to this point. Where it's not just two husbands and a friend. Where we're…three guys together."

"Like, three guys in one relationship?"

Ian nods.

I stare at him but then put up a hand and shake my head. "Look, I know marriage is all about compromise, but I can't ask you to—"

"You're not. And this isn't compromise." His lips twist a little, as if he's searching for the right words. "Quite frankly, I was pissed last night when you told me how you felt about him."

I flinch, but he's not done yet.

"And I spent a lot of time thinking about it. All night, and throughout today, right up until you got home. And the thing is, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I have feelings for him too."

"You do?"

Ian nods. "I guess what drove it home was when I caught myself freaking out that you might leave me for him, and it hurt to think about losing him too." He slides a little closer. "Josh, I don't want to lose either of you. I thought last night was the come-to-Jesus moment for you, where you needed to think about whether you want to be with me or with Michael. But I think it was that moment for all of us to realize there's an option we hadn't considered before."

Speechless. Completely fucking speechless.

Ian laces our fingers together on the cushion between us. “I don’t think I could ever feel for him or anybody else what I feel for you. And I know there’s something between the two of you that can’t exist anywhere except there.” He shifts his weight. “But maybe it doesn’t have to be a hundred percent equal on all sides. Maybe the way it is… works.”

“But…” I shake myself, certain this is all some sort of sleep-deprived hallucination. “How the fuck would something like that even work?”

Ian shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess if any of us knew that, maybe we’d have done this a long time ago. Up until we started…” He pauses, cheeks coloring a little. “Until this, uh, arrangement with Michael, I thought it was either monogamy or the casual fucking around we did when we were younger.” He waves his hand. “Maybe there’s a sweet spot somewhere in between that we didn’t think about before.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Part of me is still bracing for the worst case scenario, which makes it almost impossible to believe the solution Ian’s suggesting. “Are you…”

He squeezes my hand. “Yes, I’m serious.”

I slide closer and wrap my arms around him. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too.” He kisses my cheek and holds me tighter. “And I want all three of us to be happy, even if it means doing things that are a bit unusual.”

“I don’t know if Michael will go for that.”

Ian strokes my hair. “It’s worth a shot.”

I sit up and meet his gaze. “But…your job. The school district barely puts up with the fact that you’re gay.”

Ian chuckles, and he shrugs. “Well, what they don’t know won’t hurt me.” Turning serious, he cups my face and kisses me again. “We can be discreet. It’s really none of anyone else’s business.”

“And if they find out anyway?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” He meets my gaze. “We were both freaked out about the school district figuring out I was gay, and yeah, they don’t like it, but there isn’t a damned thing they can do about it.”

“An arrangement like this, though…”

“Then, like I said, we’ll be discreet. If it comes out…” He shrugs again. “We’ll deal with it. But I think this has the potential to be something really amazing for all three of us. I’m not going to pass that up just because someone who’s stuck in the Dark Ages might find out about it. The only ones whose opinions matter are you, me and Michael.”

“Question is, what will he think of the idea?”

“All we can do is talk to him.”

“Except I’m not sure if he’ll even take my calls right now.” Just saying it makes me sick to my stomach.

Ian’s eyebrows jump. “What do you mean? Did something happen?”

“When we talked, he said he needed some time. He didn’t come out and say it, but it was kind of a ‘don’t call me, I’ll call you’ type of thing.”

Ian scowls. “Well, all you can do is try. If he isn’t receptive right now, then we’ll wait until he comes out of the woodwork.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “He isn’t gone forever. We both know he’ll come back.”

That damned lump is rising in my throat again. “I know. I just…” I shake my head. “Fuck.”

“He’ll come back.” Ian gathers me in his arms. “And if by some chance he doesn’t, I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I close my eyes and hold him tight. This isn’t over yet, not until we’ve talked to Michael, but all I can feel right now is the most profound relief. After being so terrified that Ian was ready to walk out the door, I should be dragging him upstairs and fucking him into the ground just to make sure this is real and we’re both really here, but I can’t move.

Truth be told, I don’t want to move. We’ve joked in the past that the best part of fighting is making up, and we’ve had some explosive makeup sex over the years, but I don’t see that part happening this time. I’m physically exhausted. I’m emotionally exhausted. More than that, though, I just want to hold him like this for a moment. Right here on our couch, fully dressed and not even a little bit turned on, this is all I want.

Ian lifts his head and tips my chin up so we’re looking in each other’s eyes.

And then he kisses me, and it’s chaste and gentle, and I don’t have to ask if he feels the same way.

The sex will come later. Just…don’t move.

I want to believe Michael will come back, but right now, I’m just grateful Ian’s still here.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It takes me until almost bedtime to finally work up the nerve to text Michael.

We'd like to talk—dinner?

Of course, that's a mistake. Now I'll be up all night wondering what he's thinking, if he'll respond, if he'll be upset that I broke the silence. His departure wasn't hostile by any means, but especially in the years since he left Steve, Michael has been fiercely protective of his space. If he wants to be left alone, he wants to be *left alone*.

As I'm getting ready for bed, I have visions of him looking at the message and then shoving his phone in his pocket without responding.

"Give him time." Ian snaps me out of my thoughts with a gentle hand on my shoulder. "He's got a lot to think about."

"I know." I toss my shirt in the hamper and sigh. "But you know I'm going to freak out about it until—"

Ian kisses me softly. "I know. And there's nothing I can say that'll stop you, but *you* know I'm still going to try."

I meet his eyes and can't help laughing. "Yeah, true. I don't know why I bother trying."

He smiles, and then hugs me gently. "It'll be—"

My phone buzzes on top of my dresser, and both our heads snap toward it.

"Is that…?"

"Maybe." I grab the phone, and sure enough, there's a text from Michael.

Are you sure that's a good idea?

I gulp.

"What'd he say?" Ian asks.

I show him the message, and he frowns.

"How upset was he when you guys talked?"

"He was pretty shaken up." I look at the screen again. "He might be afraid to face you."

"Me? Why would—" He pauses. "Because of how he feels about you."

I nod.

"Maybe I should message him," Ian says. "So he knows I'm not upset."

Gnawing my lip, I try to think of a better idea but come up empty, so I sigh and lower my phone. "It's worth a shot."

He takes out his own and starts typing out a message. Before he sends it, he turns it so I can see it.

There's no hard feelings. Just want to talk.

I nod, and Ian sends the message. We both stare at our screens, waiting for the icon that indicates he's responding, but nothing happens.

Until my phone suddenly comes to life with his ringtone, and a smiling picture of him that seems so out of place right now.

I quickly answer. "Hey."

"Hey." He pauses. "So, Ian knows? What we talked about?"

My heart speeds up. "Yeah."

"And he's…"

"He's not angry. No one is." I glance at Ian for reassurance, and when he nods, I continue. "This just seems like something we should all talk about. Face to face."

He goes quiet for so long, I'm sure I dropped the call. Or worse, that he hung up.

But finally, he says, "If you guys really want to talk about this in person, let's do it sooner than later. I know it's late, but…"

"Now?"

Ian's eyebrows jump, but he shrugs. *Why not?*

Michael sighs. "I can be there in twenty."

"We'll be here."

After I hang up, I meet my husband's gaze. "Well, I guess if we're gonna lose sleep…"

"Might as well be doing something other than staring at the ceiling."

"Yeah." I put my hands on his waist. "Before he gets here… We're really okay, right? You and me?"

"I wouldn't even consider adding someone else if we weren't." He gathers me into a tight embrace. "Whatever happens tonight, nothing changes."

I just pray to God he's right.

~*~

Almost exactly twenty minutes later, Michael's at the door. As I let him in, Ariel goes crazy, barking and whapping herself in the ribs with her tail. Michael leans down to pet her, and though he's tense, he laughs—it's hard not to when she's being crazy like that.

He glances up at me, and his laughter vanishes. He clears his throat. "I hope this isn't too late at night."

"No, definitely not."

Ian steps into the foyer. "Better to clear the air now than lose sleep over it."

Michael recoils slightly, as if he's expecting Ian to lash out at him

even though he's never seen Ian lose his temper, not even when I've pushed him to the point where anyone in his right mind would have.

"Let's go sit," I say softly. "In the living room."

Michael nods. "Okay."

He follows us into the living room and takes the armchair. Ian and I take the couch, Ian on the end closest to Michael with me on the middle cushion.

Almost immediately, Rosie crawls into Michael's lap and curls up. Even from here, I can hear her purring. Though Michael's obviously tense—aren't we all?—he still pets her, and he doesn't even flinch as she kneads his leg.

No one's speaking, and everyone's focused on Rosie. She soaks it all up, of course. Nothing better for a smug cat than three people sitting in silence and admiring her.

Michael is still focused on her when he takes a breath and sets his shoulders back. "So, you guys wanted to talk."

Ian and I exchange glances. He takes my hand.

I shift my gaze to Michael. "It's about the conversation we had at lunch yesterday. About…"

Michael winces, drawing back a little as his eyes dart toward Ian.

"He told me what you guys talked about," Ian says softly.

I glance down at our joined hands, then meet Michael's gaze. "The thing is, everybody's feelings got more intense than we thought they would. But we're…"

Ian squeezes my hand gently.

I pull in a breath. "We're not so sure that's a bad thing."

Michael's eyebrows jump, and his gaze flicks back and forth between us, but he doesn't speak.

"We…" My pulse is out of control. "The thing is…"

Ian breaks in: "We want you to be part of our family."

Michael's eyes widen.

"Actually, that's not even accurate." Ian clears his throat, and he's holding my hand even tighter as he says, "Michael, having you here is what *makes* this"—he gestures at each of us in turn—"a family."

My heart flutters. God, now that he says it like that, it's so true. "He's right."

Michael chews his lip. Then he exhales and absently unsticks one of Rosie's claws from his jeans. "Look, guys. I appreciate everything you've done for me recently. It's made such a big difference, I can't even put it into words. But this was just a temporary thing. So I could move on from my ex."

"Do you want it to be temporary?" Ian asks.

I hold my breath, not sure I want to know the answer.

"You two are married." Michael's barely whispering. "I can't… I

don't want to be the third wheel."

Before I can speak, Ian says, "You're not the third wheel. If anything, I am."

My head snaps toward Ian, and Michael and I both say in unison, "What?"

Ian glances at me, then Michael. "You guys have had something special for a lot longer than I've been in the picture." Slowly, his smile comes to life. "And Josh and I, we've had something special for a long time too. It almost seems like—"

"You're not the third wheel, Ian," Michael cuts in. "The two of you… That was fate if I ever saw it. I knew the minute I met you that you and Josh were in it for the long haul."

"Then maybe there isn't a third wheel here," I say. "Does there have to be? Just because there's three people involved, does there have to be an odd man out?"

Michael shifts, petting the cat and not looking at either of us.

"He's right," Ian says. "The three of us just make sense. I mean, the nights we all spend with a bottle of wine in the hot tub? I look forward to that. And I thought it was just because it's a chance to relax and get away from everything, but honestly, I could do that alone. I could take a bottle of wine into the hot tub by myself. Or with Josh." He traces my thumb with his. "But it's not the same." He hesitates, chewing his lip, before he adds, "Looking back, I'm just surprised it took this long to figure out that there's a lot more here than a married couple and a good friend. I guess the sex just…" He glances at each of us. "It just sealed it."

Michael rests his hand on top of Rosie. "I don't even know what to say. I mean, *if* we went through with this, how would it even work?"

"We'll make it up as we go," I say.

Ian nods. "I don't think it'll be much different from what we've already been doing."

"Exactly," I say. "I think it'll pretty much work how it's *been* working all along. Quite honestly, how it's been working since even before we all started sleeping together."

They both look at me, eyebrows up.

I clear my throat. "Think about it. We can all function on our own. We can all function as pairs—Ian and me, Michael and me, you two together. But if we miss a Sunday night, we're all bummed out until we can finally do it again. Because it just feels like that's how everything should be."

Ian chews his lip for a moment. To Michael, he says, "He's got a point."

"I know he does. But it's… I…" Michael exhales hard. He picks up Rosie and carefully sets her on the armrest. Then he leans forward,

resting his elbows on his knees and covering his face with his hands. “This is a lot to take in.”

“Nothing has to happen overnight.” Ian runs his thumb along the side of my hand. “If you need to think, then by all means, take whatever time you need. If we’re all on board, then the only thing that really changes now is we just accept what we’re doing. Let it evolve. You don’t have to move in or anything like that.”

“But we can discuss that option in the future,” I say quietly. “If you want to.”

Michael rubs the bridge of his nose. “Couldn’t this get really complicated?”

“I think it already has.”

Ian nods. “I can’t think of anything more complicated than trying to ignore feelings that obviously don’t want to be ignored.”

Michael lowers his hand. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” I say. “And neither of us is pretending it’ll be bliss and perfection all the time. No relationship is.”

“It’ll definitely be an adjustment.” Ian grips my hand tighter. “Hell, Josh and I still butt heads sometimes. It just means three people squabbling over who takes out the trash and getting annoyed over leaving empty milk cartons in the fridge.”

Michael laughs. “Honestly, a relationship where the worst bone of contention involves household chores… That kind of sounds like heaven to me.” He pauses, gazing at both of us, and releases a breath. “Especially if it’s with the two of you.”

I slide over and gesture for Michael to come to the couch. “Then join us.”

He tenses, eyeing both of us and the vacancy between us. “You guys really are serious about this.”

“Absolutely.” Ian pats the cushion. “We both love you, Michael. We want you to join us.”

Michael eyes that vacant spot again. Slowly, tentatively, he rises. Ian moves his legs aside to give him room as he makes his way around the coffee table, and my heart goes crazy as Michael sinks down onto the couch between us.

He glances at me. Then at Ian. He swallows, pressing his lips together as if he’s struggling to keep his emotions in check.

I curve my hand over his leg. “Ian’s right. We want you to stay with us.”

Michael puts his hand over mine, and for a long, silent moment, he stares at that point of contact. “I can’t…”

My heart sinks. *Michael…*

Then he laughs, shakes his head and looks me in the eyes. “I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.”

Ian and I both laugh too. It doesn't seem like the right thing to do in that moment, but I'm not sure there is a right thing to do except be happy. And relieved. And pull Michael into my arms and hug him the way I did the day he left Steve for good.

I was so afraid you'd never come back.

"I love you," he whispers.

"I love you too." I kiss the top of his head, and when he meets my gaze, we both smile. Then I kiss him for real.

As I deepen that kiss, Ian slides his hand over the top of mine on Michael's back, and I open my eyes. Over Michael's shoulder, I meet Ian's gaze. His eyes have tears in them, and I realize mine are stinging a bit too.

Michael draws back, wiping his eyes.

He turns to Ian and takes his hand. The air between them is taut. They hold each other's gazes, I hold my breath, wondering what they're thinking and what one might eventually say.

Ian reaches for Michael's face, but hesitates. His hand hovers there, just inches away, before finally settling against Michael's cheek. Michael closes his eyes and presses against Ian's hand, clasping his own over the top of it.

Then Ian lifts Michael's chin, draws him in and kisses him.

And now I get why so many fairy tales use a kiss to break enchantments. The second those two make contact, it's like a spell is broken. The standoff is over. The uncertainty is gone. Michael is here, and Ian is here, and nobody's going anywhere.

Well, sort of.

I slide my hand higher up Michael's leg. "You know, we do have some furniture that's more comfortable than this couch."

Michael laughs and turns to me. "Is that your not so subtle hint that we should all go upstairs and fuck?"

"Is that a not so subtle yes?"

"You're damn right it is."

Chapter Twenty-Six

None of us waste any time carefully undressing each other. As soon as we're in the bedroom, the clothes are off, and it's on.

And what a fucking relief, just being naked in our bed with both Ian and Michael. I can't stop touching either of them. Even when I'm kissing one, my hands are all over the other, and there's hands all over me too. How did any of us think for a second that this wasn't the perfect arrangement? The way things belong?

Better late than never, I suppose.

"It hasn't been that long," Ian breathes in between kissing Michael's neck. "But God, I've missed you."

"I've missed you both." Michael slides his hand into Ian's hair and pulls his head back. "Come here, you." He kisses Ian, and holy shit. Any worries I have left about this being a compromise, about either of them taking one for the team just for the sake of peace, evaporate in the heat of that kiss.

And then Michael drops to his knees, steadies Ian's cock in both hands and closes his lips around the head. Effortlessly, without reservation, he sucks Ian's cock.

My jaw drops. My God. He really can handle this. The demons are still there, I have no doubt, but he's made it over this wall, and not just with me.

Ian glances at me, and he grins. He reaches for me, and when I step closer, he draws me in for a kiss. Before our lips meet, though, he pauses, and he smiles.

We are *okay, aren't we? All three of us.*

Then he starts to lean back in but stops again, closing his eyes and exhaling hard. "Whoa."

I glance down and have to do a double take. Michael, who had to fight hard to even think about oral sex at all, is eagerly deep-throating Ian. His eyes flick up to meet mine, and he stops what he's doing just long enough to flash me a grin. Then he slowly swallows my husband's cock as if he never had a reason not to. And before I can even process that mouthwatering sight, he turns and does the same to me—lips tight around my cock, slowly taking it until I'm sure I'm pushing his gag reflex.

"Oh my God, Michael. You're—"

Ian grabs the back of my neck and drags me into a kiss that's as breathless and passionate as the one he shared with Michael a moment ago. I hold on to him because I'm lucky I'm still standing now.

At our feet, stroking us each with one hand, Michael alternates between sucking my cock and Ian's. He teases Ian right to the edge, getting his breath to catch and making his knees shake, and then he switches to me and works nothing short of magic with his lips and tongue, swirling and fluttering and licking until I'm cursing into Ian's kiss. Jesus Christ—sex just does *not* get any better than this.

Michael releases me, and I break the kiss and look down as he sits back on his heels. "We should really take this to your bed. Before your carpet chews up my knees."

Ian laughs and offers Michael his arm. "That the only reason you want to get in bed?"

"Of course it is." Michael clasps his hand around Ian's forearm and gets up, wincing slightly as he straightens the knee he injured years ago. "But it's as good an excuse as any, right?"

"You're damn right it is." Ian drags Michael into a kiss. Michael gasps, but he's gripping Ian's shoulders and kissing him back. They stumble toward the bed while I watch, getting more and more turned on with every breath they steal from each other.

When they reach the bed, Ian shoves Michael back and pins him to the mattress, and panic shoots through me for a split second before I realize Michael's still returning Ian's kiss with as much—if not more—fervor. He's unafraid, and he's unrelenting, and when he wrestles one arm free, he throws it around Ian's neck and drags him down to him. He hooks his leg around Ian's, and Ian groans and shivers as Michael pulls their bodies closer together.

My mouth waters as I watch them. Ian's this rough with me all the time, and he must've gotten caught up in the moment and thought Michael wanted the same, and apparently he's right.

As I lie down beside them, they finally come up for air.

"You guys are…" Michael gasps for breath. "Jesus fuck."

"Tell us what you want," I whisper.

He shakes his head. "No. It's…" He pauses, taking a few more breaths. "It's been about me since day one. And none of us would…" More breaths. "None of us would be here if it hadn't been for you." He licks his lips. "Tell me what *you* want."

Ian meets my gaze, eyebrows up. *Well?*

"I want to fuck you, Michael." Enunciate. I can do this. "While you suck Ian off."

Beside me, Ian shivers. "Yes, please."

Michael's grin almost melts my bones. "Hell yeah."

Without hesitation, we change positions. Ian reclines against the pillows, and Michael gets on his hands and knees while I turn away to get some lube. I've barely started putting it on when a throaty groan from Ian turns my head. Good God. There's the Michael I knew before

—sucking cock, moaning with pleasure.

I can barely think about anything except watching the two of them. Even lubing up my own dick is too complicated when Michael's going to town on Ian and Ian's trying to watch him but has to keep blinking as if his eyes are already watering.

"Fuck 'im," Ian moans. "I want…I want to see that before…" His eyelids slide closed. "Fuck."

I can sure as hell move now. Lubed and ready, I kneel behind Michael and put some lube on him. Then I press against him. In the back of my mind, I'm irrationally sure this will be the moment when Michael panics, that he's going to suddenly tense up and return to that bad place.

But he doesn't. Moaning around Ian's cock, Michael pushes back, and I can barely breathe as my dick sinks into him.

The view is spectacular—my cock sliding in and out of Michael. His gorgeous, lean torso. His head bobbing up and down above Ian. Ian lying back and going out of his fucking mind. Everything about this is perfect. And hot. So ridiculously hot.

"Oh my God…" Ian arches, squeezing his eyes shut. "That's so good. Holy shit."

Michael groans. He rocks back and forth, riding my dick faster, and Ian curses under his breath. He's gripping Michael's hair, staring down at him, his lips apart and his forehead creased, and I fuck Michael a little harder so he'll give Ian even more.

"I'm gonna come," Ian slurs. "I'm gonna…I'm gonna…"

Much more of this, and I will too. I grit my teeth and hold Michael's hips tighter, fucking him for all I'm worth while he drives Ian insane.

"Oh…shit…" Ian's head falls back. "So fucking good." He gasps. His eyes fly open, and Michael tenses around me as he bobs his head even faster.

I struggle to keep my eyes focused, but my own orgasm is closing in fast, so I grit my teeth as I pound Michael's ass for all I'm worth. He groans, and he shudders, and apparently that's more than Ian can take—he squeezes his eyes shut again, curses and trembles as his back arches. I don't know how he doesn't take me over the edge with him—God, I love the sight of Ian falling to pieces—but somehow, I keep going, and I keep fucking Michael.

Ian takes a few seconds to catch his breath. Not long, though—he's barely wiped the sweat from his brow before he shifts around, grabs the back of Michael's neck and kisses him. He reaches beneath Michael, and I don't have to see to know he's stroking Michael's cock. The way Michael clenches around me tells me everything I need to know. And besides, *fuck, fuck*—watching those two make out is hot

enough. Knowing Michael has Ian's semen on his tongue? Knowing how Ian kisses right after he's had an orgasm?

That's it. I can't take another second.

With a roar, I slam into Michael, and I come so hard, I very nearly black for real out this time. And just as I'm coming down, Michael cries out, and he gets almost painfully tight as I take a few last thrusts before my body can't handle anymore.

I stop. Michael stops. Ian's arm stops moving. They're not kissing anymore—Michael presses his forehead to Ian's shoulder, and Ian holds him, stroking his hair. Our eyes meet. We both grin, and when Ian presses a soft kiss to Michael's damp red hair, my skin prickles with goose bumps.

I pull out carefully. None of us are all that steady on our feet, which is to be expected, but we manage as always. When we finally settle into bed, Ian and I are both on our sides, facing Michael, who's between us.

Michael exhales. "You guys are seriously unreal."

Ian grins. "You're not so bad yourself, you know."

Michael sweeps his tongue across his lips and looks at us. "I don't just mean in bed. I mean…" He reaches across me and takes Ian's hand. "Letting me in like this."

I put my hand on top of theirs on my stomach. "This isn't something we'd do with just anyone. It took someone pretty amazing to make life better with three people instead of two."

Ian nods. "That's not to say the end justifies the means. What happened to you never should have happened. But—"

"But this is one hell of a silver lining," Michael says. "If that's how things were going to work out, then I'm just glad they eventually brought me here."

Right then, Rosie leaps onto the bed, stomps over Ian and me and flops down on top of Michael.

"Seriously, cat?" Ian rolls his eyes. "We feed you, we house you, but *no*, you want *him*."

Michael laughs, tousling Rosie's fur, which would have gotten me or even Ian a claws-out swat. "I see how it is. You guys just want me here because I'm the only one your cat doesn't hate."

Ian bursts out laughing. "Oh come on. She doesn't *hate* us." He reaches across me, and she bats at him but misses. "Okay, okay. Maybe she does."

I start to speak, but Ariel jumps up behind Ian. "Shit! Watch that tail!"

He ducks and just misses a smack in the face. "Ariel, down." He points at the floor, but Ariel just flops down next to him and rests her head on his arm. Ian groans. "Seriously?"

I snicker. “I think we might need a bigger bed.”

Michael laughs, but it doesn’t last. He gently lifts Rosie and sets her on the edge of the bed. Then he turns on his side and looks at Ian. “For the record, you are not, and never have been, a third wheel. You and I aren’t as close as we both are to Josh, but it doesn’t have to stay that way.” He clasps Ian’s hand in his, and kisses the backs of his fingers. “It’ll take time, but I think we’ll get there.”

Ian’s smile is slow to form, but his eyes definitely echo it. “You’re probably right. I guess, like everything, it’ll be a process.”

Michael nods. “Yeah, and I’m a bit more optimistic about the process than I was about the sexual exorcism one.” He pauses, the smile turning to a playful smirk. “Well, okay, that process was fun *most* of the time too. But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.” Ian leans over me to kiss Michael’s lips. “And I agree.”

Michael turns to me and touches my face. “You were right, you know.”

“About what?”

“You said karma owed me big-time. That there was a good guy out there waiting for me.” His smile gets bigger, and I swear his eyes tear up as he says, “Turns out there were two right in front of my face.”

And suddenly my vision is getting blurry for some reason. I wipe my eyes. “Well, let’s hope we can live up to the karma you definitely deserve.”

Michael sniffs and wipes his eyes too. “I’m not worried about that at all.”

“Neither am I.” Ian kisses Michael’s cheek, then mine. “We’ve got all the time in the world to get it right.”

“You don’t need it,” Michael says. “You’ve already got it. But I’ll definitely take all the time I can get with the two of you.”

“Likewise,” I say.

Ian nods. “Ditto.”

It’s a little crowded in our bed with the three of us, the cat and Ariel, and I imagine it won’t be any better when Cody is added to the mix, but that’s okay. There’s nothing about this moment I would change, because I have the two men I love more than anyone else in the world. Ian’s still here. Michael’s part of our family.

And everything is perfect.

Even if the cat still hates me.

About the Author

L.A. Witt is an abnormal M/M romance writer who has finally been released from the purgatorial corn maze of Omaha, Nebraska, and now spends her time on the southwestern coast of Spain. In between wondering how she didn't lose her mind in Omaha, she explores the country with her husband, several clairvoyant hamsters, and an ever-growing herd of rabid plot bunnies. She also has substantially more time on her hands these days, as she has recruited a small army of mercenaries to search South America for her nemesis, romance author Lauren Gallagher, but don't tell Lauren. And definitely don't tell Lori A. Witt or Ann Gallagher. Neither of those twits can keep their mouths shut…

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